### Indefinite Articles

**by tvsn**

#### Summary

Effie Gwillim has it all – prosper, fame and professional acclaim. She also has an impending birthday wrought with numeric neurosis and a not-so-little secret she has been hiding in plain sight for months.

When her new boyfriend invites her to his parents' house to celebrate Easter – a much needed break from her busy routine - the very last thing she expects is to be reunited with John Graves Simcoe under the same roof for a long weekend. Can she truly move on now that her ex has effectively moved in?

#### Notes

There is an enduring trope in theatre which I believe encompasses the effect Maryassassina has long had on my work – I’ll introduce a minor character, she will comment – prophesising things that failed my consideration. I’ll think on her haunting words for days. Weeks! Questioning the nature of fate, coming to troublesome conclusions …

Like this. A pain for you, isn’t it, dear reader / cherished casual observer? Let me try my own hand at sooth-saying - right now you are thinking: ANOTHER ‘Hide and Seek’ spin off
centred around once mentioned characters? Ugh. AND it incorporates current news and football scores? Please don’t tell me … oh, yep, I knew it – there is that auxiliary figure I rather can’t stand. (It is really too bad my religion forbids me from gambling as I’m bloody amazing at predicting match results as well …)

But before I digress much further down that path (to Stamford Bridge?), this WIP is based off an extra scene I posted in response to a single line in the main text a few commenters had questions on, which I won’t bother linking as I promised it would be deleted when the next H+S update posts (whenever that may be.) My darling oracle told me that she saw Effie [Gwillim] and Percy [Simcoe] eventually coming together romantically and I instantly fell in LOVE with the idea, so much so that I am actually trying my hand at a RomCom.

There are a few warnings of which you should be aware prior to proceeding, chief among them being that this story takes place roughly two years after the events of the original (beginning specifically this past Wednesday - 14.03.2018.) This, of course, means that there are a few spoilers, but nothing that has not already been mentioned or alluded to in the main text, and mostly seen from a distance of oh, say 5, 585 km (3,470 miles.) Potentially upsetting themes specific to this chapter include: custody battles, inheritance issues, politicians on social media, walks of shame, signs of aging, and mixed-collar dating.

As always, I hope you enjoy!
An Invitation

Chapter Notes

It took Effie Gwillim until the third swipe of the snooze button on the alarm she had set on her mobile for orientation to set it. Although blocks away from her own penthouse, she felt at home curled up in the arms of the man snoring lightly beside her. She felt at home until she felt fifteen, slumbering memories awakening to a new neurosis as she admired her new lover’s face only to find traces of her ex within his features.

Effie Gwillim was in one of the upstairs bedrooms of a city flat leased by a conservative MP whose unsettlingly swift rise to power was proving distractive enough to liberal activists that few were paying attention to what was actually going on at Westminster. In the past two years, Effie had transformed her tabloid into one of the foremost respected news sources in Great Britain, where her formal rivals and current competitors hassled to be the first to print the latest in what their dwindling readers had seen on Twitter hours earlier. She took a deep breath. She could not be seen leaving this house in yesterday’s suit without becoming the subject of lies she found herself in no position to contradict, for the truth of the matter was far more damning. Effie Gwillim did not have access to information on secret trade negotiations because she was sleeping with her best friend’s husband as many speculated and would surely now shout; she knew and wrote what she did because this particular Minister of Parliament had no better idea what was going on with Brexit than any of his esteemed colleagues and often asked for her input rather than admit defeat. Things were exactly as they had been in boarding school, down to the surname of the man whose bed Effie was currently occupying.

She had slept with her ex’s younger brother.

She had slept, more concisely, with the bodyguard of a beloved philanthropist who herself had made an absolute fortune in the opium trade and whose partner was in the process of weakening the pound. Effie Gwillim had to get out of this house before the truth had a chance to.

She dressed as quickly and quietly as possible, planting a light kiss on Percy’s cheek before she tiptoed out of the room, stilettos in hand. She took the servant’s stairwell and had nearly made her way to the garage before she was discovered by two barking dogs - demanding in their confused language that they be pet. Effie complied as much out of instinct as she did adoration for the loud animals, cooing their rubbish names softly as she rubbed their bellies until they quieted. She had not heard footsteps over the sounds of the spoilt terriers as she spoke to them the way a baby might conduct a post-match press conference, their tails thumping against the floor to indicate that they were pleased with their pampering.

“Mou – oh who’s a good boy? Who is a good boy? Pep, you’re a good boy! Good boys!” she puckered.

“Aunt Effie?”

Effie looked up to find Marie Robinson with two leashes and a deeply confused expression. She was no more the girl’s aunt than Ban Tarleton was her father, but people without families made their own wherever they might. “Hi,” Effie smiled, attempting to improvise an excuse for her presence, “I just … let myself in. There is something pressing I wanted to see if your dad would give me a quote on … um.”
“Why aren’t you wearing shoes?” the teenager squinted. Her question was not as accusatory as it was curious. Effie felt herself on trial all the same. “These? Oh, they are at least two seasons old,” she explained. In truth, they were her favourite pair. “I thought I would give Mou and Pep a few new chew toys. Heh … Jimmy Choo toys – do you get it?”

“What is it with old people and bad puns?” Marie commented to herself with a small roll of her eyes. She was right. Effie was nearly thirty, far too old by her own estimations to sneak away from the shame of waking up with a slightly younger man far below her social strata. “If you don’t want your shoes anymore though, may I have them?” Marie asked, adding, “I don’t think my dogs should get too used to people-things. So are you here about Mayor Hewlett?”

“Yes?” Effie squinted as she handed her heels to the girl, reasonably satisfied that she would get them back before the day was through as her feet were at least a size smaller than those of anyone else she knew.

“Come on,” Marie shrugged. “My dad will give you a quote. He has been talking about nothing else all morning. You know how he gets.”

Effie Gwillim had little context for what was going on, but that Tarleton could overreact to anything was a constant. It was a curse. A pox on both the houses of Lords and Commons. She took a deep breath before moving to follow.

“That was fast,” Ban commented as the two entered the otherwise empty dining room not looking up from his paper.

“They didn’t need to go out, they were only barking because Aunt Effie was trying to sneak in. She wants a quote about Anna Hewlett and, presumably, her staff.”

Marie reclaimed her seat behind a plate of half-eaten Nutella toast, a few pieces of chopped fruit that seemed untouched and the sport section of the same paper, a rival, Effie noted. She looked at her watch. It was a little after seven. Either Everton had lost their weekend fixture and her friend had no interest in resurfacing traumatic memories or something else in Britain was deeply amiss. Effie had known Ban since she was in pampers. She had never known him to read the UK section before at least skimming the sporting news. She had never known him to read The Guardian at all.

“Caught reading The Guard?” she mocked.

“One of Anderson’s aids was stabbed in a kabab shop a few blocks from my house,” he answered curtly before returning his attention to his child, currently occupied with her new pair of shoes and the nearly impossible task of squeezing her feet into them. “Marie,” he warned. “You need to take the dogs out for a walk before you go to school. That was the deal, remember?”

Pep was a relatively new addition to the family. They had gotten him seven months ago when Mou had taken ill. Marie’s mother and namesake had been in hospital, too, at the time and the girl had not smiled in weeks. The puppy was a distraction, an animal bought that the fifteen-year-old’s mind might be less burdened with death. Mou had made a recovery, Mary, Effie knew, would not.

“Not in these shoes,” her daughter murmured. This caused Ban to look up.

“No, not in those shoes. You’re not wearing them to collage either. Put your trainers back on and get
“Change, take your puppy out so that he may do his business and let me and Effie get on with ours,” he dismissed, turning to Effie and giving her a smile that betrayed nothing of whatever business he was in with the mayor of a small town in America. “Why are you walking around my home without shoes, Elizabeth?” he taunted.

“I thought … your dogs might like them,” she lied again.

“She wanted to make a pun with a prop,” Marie explained. Effie shot her a sharp glare. There were few situations in which she respected Banastre Tarleton as an authority figure, but watching him parent made her feel more like a little girl than waking up in Percy’s bed and subsequently sneaking away had done. She was sure now that she would be caught and that there would be consequence.

“Puns are the highest form of literature,” Ban countered his ward’s disapproval by quoting Hitchcock.

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit,” Marie answered in the words of Oscar Wilde.

“But the highest form of intelligence,” Effie smiled, completing the statement for her.

“Can I still keep them?” Marie begged of the stilettos.

Not wanting to betray her word, Effie answered yes at the same time Ban responded no. Marie let the door slam as she stormed out, only to be called back moments later, give a cordial farewell with a surly little curtsy and a proper close of the door. Undoubtedly, she would spend the entire round of the block tweeting and texting her school friends about how unfair life was. Effie felt a bit guilty for getting the girl’s hopes up. Ban buried his face in his single functioning hand and with it, whatever emotions he felt about not spoiling his not-quite-step-daughter with pretty but impractical footwear.

When he returned to Effie, he wore the same expression she had come to know when they themselves had been children - judgemental, but keen to bargain. Effie wonder if she would have seen it if she had not spent the night with the biological brother of the boy Ban had roomed with whilst at boarding school. She wondered if she should know by this point. She had been with John Graves Simcoe for over a decade. In the years that separated ‘then’ from ‘now’, she had known no other partner, something that had become the topic of concern and critique.

“I’m guessing you aren’t here because I was awoken up by an angry American asking that I not tweet his boss anything congratulatory. Apparently,” he smarted, “Anna doesn’t want to remind her base that we two are related through marriage. Setauket is far too partisan for exchanging pleasantries. Now, on to true matters of public interest,” he smirked, plainly studying her undone appearance.

“What exactly did you write?” Effie challenged, hoping to deflect attention.

Ban’s eyes widened with his smile until laughter forced them shut. “You must have had quite a night! Oh, Effie and Percy, whoever would have -”

“Can you stop?”

Effie took her phone from her purse and was in the process of opening up her Twitter App when her school friend and primary source on most matters regained himself enough to relay that Anna Hewlett was pregnant again. He had personally written her and her husband well wishes and she
had, in response, delegated a member of her staff to ring his office requesting that the tweet be deleted. Anna had also apparently responded in the same manner to the congratulations offered by President Trump and several members of his staff, including Benedict Arnold, which, in light of the shared history between the two, may have been the height of cheek. Ban had spent the rest of the morning notifying every public servant he could think of whose politics Anna might have grounds to oppose, gathering them into a collation of congratulators with the intent of overburdening the intern who had caused him offence. Thus far, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Marine le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Benjamin Netanjahu and the Pope had all responded to his call to arms. Angela Merkel had not, which came as little surprise – she only expressed condolences for disasters months after it would have been appropriate to do so.

“Anna’s pregnant?” Effie blinked.

“That is your takeaway from all of this? Do you want some tea? Coffee? … Aspirin?”

What Effie wanted was to sing in celebration. Public figures on social media rarely offered her any relief, but a local politician slighting her idealistic opposition for retweeting her ultrasound was a gift. It gave her all the reason in the world to be here, reason she could defend the same way she always had – with disparaging headlines about people she loosely knew. Her mind ran and retracted multiple layouts of the inside scoop of same scandal whilst half-ignoring her host, who, for his part, was expressing satisfaction at having won a battle after hardly having fired a shot. He would not, namely, be spending Easter in Scotland with his wife’s family for the third year in a row.

“Give me the name of the intern who called your office and I’ll make sure you are never welcomed back,” Effie offered with a smirk of her own. Whatever interest her friend had in her suddenly torrid love life had vanished.

“What are you doing for Easter?” he asked.

“Dover, probably, unless that is an invite,” Effie winked.

“You want to come to Liverpool?”

“No.”

“How about Leicester?” Percy asked her an hour later from the back of a borrowed limousine that taxied them to her office behind tinted windows when she had finished relaying her escape plan gone awry. “I … realise that I might be misreading,” he mumbled after a minute had passed, “I mean, I don’t wish to overstep your boundaries -”

It was the first time, Effie realised, that Percy Nantaba was the one asking her out. All of their dates had been at Effie’s own request - hiding their relationship in the plain sight of faceless bloggers who saw her at a fancy restaurant with a servant and posted pictures of her dining ‘alone’, ‘again’. Percy, six-foot-six and easily twenty-five stone seemed amused at the anonymity for a long while; he seemed now to want something more.

The two had been loosely flirting for the better part of the past two years, since circumstance had first forced them into conversation. Effie had been taken with him on looks alone long before. The attraction ended abruptly upon discovering that Percy, who told her that he had been abandoned and adopted in infancy, was in fact the younger brother John Graves Simcoe had long believed to be
dead. The two shared a nose, a hair colour, a strong chin and little else, owing to the differences in their upbringings. Percy had been taken in by a mixed race, middle-class, kindly couple from the Midlands where John had stayed with his father in Pakistan after his parents had separated over the loss of an infant and the extent to which Kathrine’s post-partum depression threatened their surviving son. John was returned to England after a car-bombing incident took his father and most of his hearing. He had then lived with his mother for a few months until she decided that she was no more ready for the responsibilities of that role than she had been eight years before half way across the world. Kathrine had taken her life in a moment of unbearable doubt and custody of her child had passed to his godfather, who, by the hand of fate had sent the boy to the same boarding school as that which Effie would later attend.

She and John had grown up together. They had planned to grow old together. Things had not worked out as Effie had long hoped. John had taken a job in America and was now the CFO of a successful company in which Effie Gwillim served as the majority chair, owning more than fifty percent of its stocks. They met a few times each year at shareholders meetings, occasionally going out for drinks afterwards and toasting to old times. No amount of shared recollections seemed to warrant a return. He was happy in New York. He told her stories about the children he coached in a sport he now referred to as ‘soccer’, about the latest petty argument he was in with Edmund Hewlett, about the sea-scent in the air of the town he now called ‘home’. She knew he had a girlfriend, but she never came up in conversation, likely by the design of an unspoken agreement. Effie, for her part, had yet to mention Percy. For a long while, she had had little to say on the topic. It was only a product of the last few months that they met often enough outside the presence of his employer for Effie to consider that something might come of her somewhat shameful crush.

The brothers kept in touch, of that she was aware. They texted often and Skyped a few times a month, mostly, her boyfriend informed her, so that John could practice his Urdu while attempting to convert him to a second-tier footballing outfit. They got on insofar as she could tell. Percy had not, however, mentioned his new relationship as of yet. John had expressed envy before over the split trajectory of their lives; Percy did not want to give him cause to resent the similarities it seemed they now shared.

He had grown up in a loving home with parents who, upon learning that their son had a biological brother, were ready and willing to emotionally adopt a man in his thirties. ‘Why risk what we have?’ he once returned the prying question of ‘Why not?’ with his own. Effie had not risked asking him to define which ‘we’ he meant. She knew from her friends who had siblings that they would choose each other over quite nearly any obstacle. She could not stand to hear that she was second best in the brown eyes of a man she knew herself to be in love with.

“Are you asking me if I want to meet your mum?” Effie smiled. She, too, wanted more than sneaking around houses that were not her own with secrets she no longer wished to keep. She wanted more than to be left wondering if their relationship, for what it was, failed to compare with the affection he felt for his newfound brother an ocean away. She would have settled for a simple ‘yes.’

“It is a small, private thing … nothing that would interest your enemies or attract any unwanted attention,” Percy answered. Effie felt her face fall into a slight pout. Her lover continued, so certain, it seemed, of her rejection that he now tried to frame his offer in an excuse.

“Patel asked Lady – sorry Doctor -” he stopped. Effie nodded, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. ‘Lady’ was in fact the proper honorific, but the blood princess by whom Percy was employed had decided when it was announced that her non-noble husband was to be awarded an OBE for exemplary service to the crown that she would prefer that her title had nothing to do with her relationship to some man or another. It was a victory for feminism (and perhaps republicanism.) It
was still a bit much for her long-serving staff and certain members of the public to take in. Effie saw it as merely a waste of ink and often still printed ‘Lady’ as a precursor rather than list for the sake of context a number of custodial titles her best friend still held behind her academic rank and new last name – a practice that in itself served to remind Effie both of the tragic state of the monarchy and, on a purely personal level, how woefully far behind she was on Game of Thrones.

“Patel asked Dr Tarleton when she informed him that she would be spending the holiday at her sister-in-law’s home if he might still be permitted to travel up to Edinburgh to visit his girlfriend,” Percy prattled. “She told him that it was in order, that she would not be working and as such could survive with a reduced staff. I then asked if I might take time off to visit family as well, to which she consented immediately, and I – I thought, maybe, that is, if you aren’t otherwise engaged over the holiday that you might … want to join me?” his ruddy cheeks reddened.

“Yes! Oh my God, I’d love to!” Effie exclaimed, throwing her arms around Percy’s broad shoulders.

“Really?”

“Of course I want to meet your parents! From everything I’ve heard about them they sound wonderful.”

“They are; they are. They want to meet you as well, they’ll love you, I’m certain of it.”

Love, Effie thought. Two years of shy smiles, ten months of secret rendezvous, and the word had never come up outside of this single context. She had thought it many times without considering if Percy felt the same. She had long been afraid to ask, nearly certain of negation.

“Don’t worry,” he smiled, “I haven’t told them your name or anything; I know how you value your privacy.”

It was not the sort of assurance Effie needed. She thanked him all the same when the car pulled to a stop in front of her building.

Lunch with the girls was exactly what she needed whilst being the furthest thing from it. The morning had dragged despite the resignation of Rex Tillerson – the third member of Trump’s cabinet to leave within the week were Effie paying attention, something she was not sure she was in any state to do. It dragged despite the outcry of adoration for Anna Hewlett’s unborn child from the world’s worst offenders of human rights violations, something that ceased being amusing when the Pope’s tweet reopened a debate on the line of succession – would Edmund Hewlett -who had never officially abdicated- still be eligible for inheritance under the Succession to the Crown Act? Was his wife then ineligible to serve as mayor in a town of seven-hundred souls under the Emoluments Clause of the US Constitution that no one in her office seemed to understand?

Effie herself did not care if it did. The world was always falling to pieces in some fashion. If today it involved the Hewletts, the Trump White House and Manchester United’s exit from the Champions League, tomorrow her millions of readers could go back to worrying about Harry and Meghan, Brexit, and the arms deal struck between Germany and Turkey.

Effie herself did not have a care for any of it. She left the staff meeting early, returned to her desk and googled her own name, finding pictures of her and Percy together captioned as ‘alone’. She began to question if there was any truth to this, and, if so, how much of it was her fault. She had tried to run
away in the morning without waking him; she had been ready to run away with him had he only been bothered to ask. She had been relieved at the rescue Ban Tarleton’s inability to suffer a slight had afforded her; she had been furious that Percy did not touch on the most basic details when telling his mum about the girl he wanted to bring home for Easter. Effie Gwillim was tired of the shadows but shy before the light of day. She wondered to what extent this had to do with her past relationship with John Graves Simcoe. Telling herself that she should not, she googled his name as well.

The editor-in-chief was in her second hour of stalking her ex on social media when her secretary knocked once to tell her she had a call on line four. Effie minimalized the screen, afraid of imagined consequence. For this affront to her own sensibility, she scolded herself. She owned this paper. She owned the building. She paid everyone’s salary. What did it matter if she was giving into her baser instincts on company time when she ran the company?

It mattered, she realised as she lifted her receiver and pressed the blinking light for the line after giving her secretary a quick nod of thanks and dismissal, quite a great deal indeed. There were only a select handful of people who knew this particular number to her office. Imagining that the call was not coming from Buckingham Palace, Downing Street, her Aunt Margaret who worked in the same field or an accountant in Scotland who had once been a cop, one of Effie’s few close friends was ringing. She swallowed. Maybe Ban had not been bought off quite so easily. Maybe he had told everyone about her and Percy. Maybe it was Percy on the line. Effie could not bear to speak to her boyfriend while staring dreamily at his ever-absent older brother.

“Hello?”

>>Effie - Mary Anne. Hey, listen – I have an early afternoon deposition and I need to eat something before, Ellie Hew is in the area for her meeting with the arbitrator and we were going to grab a bite, you in? You have time?<<

Effie found herself in a café in Holborn half an hour later. By the time she had arrived, Mary Anne and Ellie were already deeply engrossed in a two-way conversation in a shared maternal language which Effie understood only just enough of to realise that she ought not have come. It always seemed to her that Scots Gaelic was altogether absent of pleasantries, neither of her company spoke it when they had anything nice to say. From what Effie could gather from her place between the doorway and the thick curtain shielding London’s legal set from prying eyes, Ellie was ready to go to war with her American sister-in-law and everyone engaged in the odd internet meme of wishing her well. Effie took a deep breath as she entered. Turning to find their table, she ran directly into Percy.

“Hey,” she said timidly.

“Alright, Miss Gwillim?”

“Fine,” she mumbled. Mary Anne had risen to greet her. Giving Percy a final forced smile, finding that she would rather weep, she went to embrace her friends, giving them kisses on both cheeks before taking her seat, hiding behind the day’s lunch menu.

Invisibility, thankfully, was not hard to achieve when one was dining with two elfin princesses. Both of the girls she had grown up with were easily six foot in heels, not so far from it without. Were it not for their family names and extensive educational backgrounds, Effie could imagine either on a runway. As it was, Mary Anne Burges and Eleanor Tarleton, néé Hewlett, were more likely to
appear on the cover of reputable publications than on an insert advertising expensive intimates. Effie, who often felt small among them in every sense, sank in her stool, fully obscured by her inability to choose between a latté and a cappuccino whilst Mary Anne caught her up to speed. A member of the wait staff came, carrying a bottle of water and three crystal glasses on a silver serving tray. He brought an Americano for Ellie, a vanilla macchiato for Mary Anne and a question for Effie.

“Hot chocolate, please,” she answered, feeling as much like a child as she had upon waking up in the arms of another Simcoe. She studied Ellie. The populists’ princess whose refusal to recognise any aristocratic nomenclature either did not know or did not care about the goings on between her staff and her friend. Neither seemed likely. Effie questioned what would be worse. If Ellie knew and was biding her time before confrontation, she was forging the troublesome information into a weapon she would at some opportune moment wield with words. If she did not know, there was a chance that she herself could be cut by this truth. Effie decided to confess, come what may. It was better to have it out. She knew from bitter experience the horrors born from buried secrets.

It seemed, however, that she would have to wait. From what she gathered from Mary Anne’s rapid-fire retelling, she had missed quite a lot whilst slacking off at work. The Pope, whose inclusion among the list of people whose blessings Anna Hewlett would best like to avoid had evaded Effie’s reasoning until now, had apparently blessed the unborn child over Twitter, creating a perception that Britain might once again suffer a Catholic queen. That Mary I still remained in the public conscious was news to the editor of The Daily Mail, as was the idea that the low-born wife of a prodigal nobleman, himself only 114th in line, would ever be crowned.

“No,” Mary Anne informed her. “The Sun translated and printed a particularly unkind Belarussian article about Meghan Markel in response.”

“Shit.”

“We cannot tolerate this right now,” Ellie tensed. “Anything, anything at all that makes it look as though my family has designs at power -”

“That is not going to happen,” Mary Anne said sharply. “When you get back from Liverpool, come to my office and we will work through all of this messy business. I got a client presumed guilty of attempted manslaughter primary custody of her son even though her husband works in the White House and her father in law sits on the US Supreme Court. I never even had to get on a plane,” she bragged by way of comfort.

The two continued to speak about a custody dispute involving Ellie’s goddaughter who currently lived with herself and her husband who had long served as surrogate father to the girl, having previously dated her mother. Effie struggled to listen. She had introduced Mary Anne to the American client in question, more identifiable by vague speech that she might have been by name. John was dating her. Effie felt a knife twist inside.

“You are going to Liverpool?” she interrupted. “What, for Easter?”

“That too,” Ellie replied solemnly.

“Listen,” Effie told her when lunch arrived, “I’ll do anything I can -”

Ellie met her offer with a sharp glare. “Do you remember how when I was offered Argyll upon my marriage, Banastre was given a pay-out in exchange for a title no one was willing to grant him and used the money to run for public office? Remember how he won - primarily thanks to your reporting of the details of the transaction? For all the actual power he now wields in rather ironic result, neither of us can move without extending someone or another an outrageous insult.”
“I was trying to help -”

“Whatever you think you found out sneaking about my house this morning, I’ll pay you what where you ask not to print it."

Effie swallowed. She had not been spying. Not intentionally anyway. It would be better to simply confess.

“Please,” Ellie continued, softening her tone. “Please, please, please – you have no idea Effie, none of you have any idea what it is like to have every small interaction scrutinized by everyone you know, everyone you ever have and everyone you ever- and never — will, and I am beginning to think it is not the sort of behaviour that can be learned. It is exhausting to do this for everyone all the time. Anna won’t apologise for her faux pas. Edmund is pretending to be shocked and offended to anyone he speaks to – yet another example of his strategy of avoidance betraying him in full. Ban might actually be proud to have begun the whole thing but right now, I have Patel on the phone trying to arrange an opportunity for Ban and I to make amends with Harry and Meghan before this whole ordeal gets even more out of hand. Half of London hates us right now and if it gets out,” she stopped, shifted. “You know what it is, don’t you? He is spiralling. He always pulls shit like this when he cannot move to affect his real problems. Mary Robinson is in the process of planning her funeral and he won’t speak to her because he can’t process it. It was the same when his father died and he went to Iraq and oh God, oh God, Mary Anne – what if Thomas’ lawyers pull the transcripts of his court martial in a custody hearing?”

Ellie seemed like she was on the verge of tears.

“We don’t know that it will get that far,” Mary Anne assured her.

“It won’t,” Effie promised. The entire situation was convoluted. Mary Robinson and Banastre Tarleton had been together for nearly fifteen years. She had been married all the while and was wedded still. Now on her deathbed, Mary sought to make amends with her estranged husband, who for his part responded to her attempts at reconciliation by demanding a paternity test be done on her daughter Marie. According to Mary Anne, it was a bluff which they could easily call him on. The idea that a man who had expressed little interest in his wife and legal charge suddenly wanted to be part of the now-teenager’s life seemed unlikely. The more plausible explanation was that he wanted her stricken from inheritance. If it turned out he was not Marie’s father, his fight for custody would be dismissed. If he was, they could turn and sue him on her behalf for fifteen years of unpaid child support, again ending any court sympathy for whatever claims he was threatening against her present guardians.

“I don’t want to do anything to hurt Mary, or do anything that might stand in the way of a relationship Marie might one day want to have with her legal father.”

“You will though, with Marie anyway,” Mary Anne said to Effie’s utter shock. “It is unavoidable, you can do everything right and still manage to fuck up your kids in some way. Accept it. Look at us – at all of us. I had the most loving, nurturing parents anyone could ask for. Effie’s Aunt Margaret is a feminist icon and kept that status even after leaving Vogue to run a yellow paper until Effie came of age. You, dear Eleanor, had no relationship with your parents whatsoever and still found reasons to hate them. And all of us are good hearted people who wake up every day to tens of death threats. But you know what? We are all strong enough to be able to get on anyway, and that is all you can hope for with kids. In my experience of taking them away from which ever parent didn’t hire me to sort their divorce proceedings, anyway.”

“Well, from one of Brittan’s worst women to another, cheers,” Effie raised her glass.
“The Greeks believed that if you toasted with water you would lose your soul,” Ellie responded without lifting hers.

“Ellie,” the editor sighed. “I didn’t print anything about Anna Hewlett or anything related to it and I have no intention of doing so.”

“Ah but you must – otherwise it will appear as though we are in one another’s … beds.”

She knew. Effie was now certain of it. She was threatening to go to Liverpool to punish her, to take Percy away. “Ban told me this morning that he found it unfortunate how partisan American politics were that room appears not to exist for simple niceties,” Effie suggested. “He said it was an intern, rather than Anna herself, who phoned his offices asking for him to retract his public congratulations. I’ll print that.”

“That should be fine. Thank you.”

“I’ll get a reporter on Thomas Robinson, too. Figure out what he is hiding so neither of you will be surprised by anything else he tries.” Ellie told them both she loved them with tears in her eyes and Mary Anne ordered a round of digestives with which they all toasted to a change of topic.

Effie wished the two had decided on anything other than her recurring absences from public life.

“I haven’t seen or heard much of your for weeks,” Mary Anne whined, “and Ellie hasn’t gotten much of you either, outside of a professional capacity, tough,” she paused, shifting blame, “who exactly is to blame for that is not mine to judge.”

“A man. Some man. We can always blame a man,” Ellie prattled, reciting as she waved a finger.

Effie glanced back to Percy. “A man?” she repeated.

“Have you forgotten Aunt Margaret’s doctrine?” Mary Anne laughed. “So, what man are we going to blame?”

“Ban, I assume.”

“He has enough problems. Hm, Effie? Tell us there a man in the picture? It would certainly explain a lot.”

“What … exactly?” Effie smiled.

“Well that is the same suit you were wearing yesterday,” Ellie raised an eyebrow.

“I was working late.”

“Oh honey, we’ve all been there,” Mary Anne grinned. “You just need to set some boundaries. I’m seeing a bloke now, too, as it happens – we both have offices in the English and Scottish capitals and have it in fine print that we’ll never meet twice in a row the same city. I fucked him in London last, so I imagine we’ll meet for a quickie in Edinburgh at Easter and no one will be the wiser.”

“You have a contract … with your boyfriend?”

“Oh, he is not my boyfriend, that is the first clause. It is just a fling, but we run in a few of the same circles and needed to establish rules. I’ve done this with everyone I’ve been with since law school. Improved the sex a great deal -”

“Mary Anne! That is the most … that is the most ‘Fifty Shades’ thing that has ever been forced upon
my ears,” Effie gasped.

“You edit a tabloid,” Ellie replied flatly.

Mary Anne found amusement in the assessment and in so lost a bit of her composure. “Do you still have an Audible account?” she laughed. “I finished listening to ‘Darker’, I could just send that to you as a point of comparison.”

“I have a degree in literature,” Effie defended.

“And I have one in law,” Mary Anne countered, regaining her near constant equanimity. “I don’t see where you find problem with this; it is just a basic relationship agreement.”

“It takes the romance out of falling in love doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know, I have a sex clause in my prenup, too, and I think my marriage is better off for it,” Ellie answered. Effie sighed. The more she heard about the infamous prenup, the more she wished she could forget. Her two friends were of one mind on the matter, both considering the one-hundred-thirty-page legal document peerless in the genre of romantic reading material. Effie understood the argument though she did not subscribe to it: ten years prior Ban Tarleton had gotten into it with some Headhunters, likely in the most football-related of all of the firm’s violent escapes, having been in a public fight with Chelsea’s then-captain over another woman since he was seventeen. Ellie Hewlett had settled some debt on his behalf and, in the heat of the moments after whatever transaction she had made in long forgotten alleyway, he had asked her to marry him. Ellie, owing to her character and convictions, left the question unanswered for ten years. In the time between their lives continued as though the matter of their mutual had never come up. When he tried his luck again in some Scottish police station, she informed him, presumably after saying yes (though possibly before), that he would have to agree to the prenuptial agreement penned by Mary Anne Burges and consented to by his lawyer, who, to make circumstance all the stranger, happened to also be his older brother.

When Effie thought about Clayton and Mary Anne sitting in a boardroom composing clauses in legal jargon over the hypothetical intercourse between two individuals with whom they shared personal relationships that ought to have excuse their active minds from this particular consideration, she felt a bit ill.

“Aw!” Mary Anne squealed with affection. Ellie gave her a warm-hearted smile. Effie pushed her salad away slightly, finding she was no longer in any condition to eat.

“It is stipulated that we do it at least twice a week and, I’m pleased to report, after two years of hard training Ban can last quite nearly five minutes and I can let him hold me afterwards without having involuntary muscle spasms,” Ellie elaborated for what Effie sincerely hoped was not her benefit.

“The key is him not apologising afterwards,” Mary Anne smiled knowingly, “I’m glad I put that in.”

“Shouldn’t it be natural?”

“It is natural,” Ellie defended, “no one is arguing that it is not, but we’re adults with issues and assets and it makes sense to figure everything out before making any promises.”

Effie frowned. With John, she had been certain of everything, and yet nothing worked out. The idea that the absence of a decade’s worth of expensive legal circumscription was to blame was offensive. Both of her best friends were entirely vile in their reduction of romance to a list of doubts and demands. Effie wondered if she was the only one at their table who still believed in love or had ever had any reason to.
“Oh Christ, fuck me, it is the face,” Mary Anne whispered.

“So uncanny,” Ellie agreed in hushed tones.

“What? That I look just like my aunt?” This long-standing joke was tragically becoming a legitimate concern. Effie found in the florescent lights of her office WC three grey hairs that same morning, same as she had ever morning for what now felt like months. Luckily, her hair was thick enough that a couple of tugs of her tweezers did nothing by means of thinning. Grey sighting, all the same, had become something of a macabre sport. She had lately witnessed her own face in the mirror, wrinkled up in a highly attentive sort of disapproval and recognised the woman who had raised her within the same features she once though uniquely her own.

“Only when you wrinkle your brow like that,” Ellie said with an octane of pity. Effie knew, however, that this was the expression she wore whilst staring at whatever screen was before her. She sat and stared at computers, phones and tablets eighteen hours of each day. Either she already looked like her aunt or she soon would. While she could still entertain the ideals of love and courtship the way she had as a child, her flowers in this fantasy were beginning to wilt.

“And your frown lines, stop puckering your lower lip,” Mary Anne dismissed.

Effie cover her face, worried the resemblance strengthened with her sudden hatred of the pretty blonde and her perfect, youthful skin. Mary Anne still had a year before ‘thirty’ would hang over her like the preverbal sword of Damocles. Ellie, a mere month younger than herself, wore expressions too seldom for any to stick, although, Effie reasoned, the pretty philanthropist likely was not upset over the idea. ‘Thirty’ would be far less to cry about if one were happily married without having ever bothered with the stress of dating.

“I guarantee that Margaret Spinkels has a sex clause in her prenup too,” London’s most sought after divorce attorney smarted.

“I really don’t want to think about that,” Effie sank.

“I can imagine it, ‘If once a year isn’t enough to satisfy you, you are clearly maleficent.’ Ah! How do posh people manage to speak at all,” Mary Anne complained after swapping her Scotch for the purpose of a single sentence, “my jaw hurts.”

“I think it is that theirs are elongated just enough that it comes over as natural,” he compatriot replied.

“You, darling Eleanor, are literally the Queen’s second cousin,” Effie muttered.

“What is that tone?”

“You are hypocrite if there ever was one.”

“So are you,” Mary Anne accused. “You’re jealous hearing that Ellie and I have contracts that satisfy our cardinal needs. Oh, what would Aunt Margaret say to that?”

“Hold on,” Ellie said, reaching her mobile out of her purse.

“You are phoning her?” Effie gaped.

“No there is an app for that specifically,” Ellie replied, fighting a smile. “It is just like Siri except no matter what you think to ask it, it generates a random sound clip with the sole purpose of insulting your moral character through pseudo-feminist rhetoric. Watch – Maggie, should we order dessert?”
“That is cliché in such a manner that proves insulting to sensibility.”

“That. the. fuck. is that?” Effie rephrased, hearing her aunt’s voice scolding them though Ellie’s iPhone.

“It is two-pounds-forty-nine in the app store and supported by iOS and Android devices.”

“Not everyone is blessed with a hyper-judgemental mother figure,” Mary Anne grinned. She could afford to. She still had perfectly blonde hair not yet besmirched with signs of aging and youthful skin that a solid year separated from any concerns that the corners of her lips would create creases. Effie fought and failed against her urge to frown once more.

“Right, well, when Patel manages to get Meghan’s people on the phone to find out how to deal with our other American Catholic, find out if she happens to know how to perform an exorcism on an electronic platform,” Effie spat. “I can’t believe people would pay for such a pack of nonsense.”

“Let’s try it again,” Ellie said, content to ignore her. “Maggie, should people who live in glass houses throw stones?”

>>Having a man front the bill isn’t an affront to feminism, it is reaching a damages agreement for the psychological trauma of having one’s time utterly wasted without out the mess of arbitration.<<

“Oh, I am going to use that,” Mary Anne laughed.

“The app or the advice?”

“Both.”

“Right?!”

“You two are absolutely pathetic.”

“Maggie,” Ellie looked up with a darkened expression, “more specifically, one of my best friends is sleeping with my bodyguard and sneaking around my home in the wee small hours. How might I best convey to her that she one – is in absolutely no position to criticise anyone for their better decision making abilities, and two – really out to consider a contract that would protect her honour and her assets?” she chirped.

Effie felt her heart stop. “Is that why you suddenly have to go to Liverpool?”

“I have to go to Liverpool because a known member of an alt-right group attacked one of the mayor’s aides in a kabab shop last night, a gesture of solidarity with the victim and the proprietor who stepped in to save him. Flowers, funds … and then I’m going to sort a small territorial dispute the incident brought to my attention,” she smiled wickedly without dropping her pleasant tone. “The fact that I might get a decent night sleep afterwards is a bonus, I admit.”

“Ellie, Percy and I, it’s not -”

“The last thing I need today? No, the last thing I need is the amount of attention your colleagues are affording a war of insincere pleasantries involving my husband and sister-it-law on social media when I’m faced with a sudden custody challenge and half a hundred additional fires to fight. I’m insulted that you would try to keep this … relationship from me and Mary Anne, though.”

Effie glanced briefly back at Percy, seated a table away with other members of the three meeting entourages. Even in a chair, he towered above them all. He offered her a small smile. Effie was
embarrassed by her inability to return it.

“It is not like I can speak about it with him right there,” she stressed between clenched teeth.

“He isn’t listening,” Effie dismissed. “He is working. He is good at his job, which is why he is coming with me. You often say to me ‘it’s not personal, it’s business’, which I have always accepted, but I admit I cannot quite comprehend why you won’t afford me the same understanding. I’ll be back by the weekend. I imagine I’ll stay in, which means Percy will have off and you’ll be free to frolic around with your lover as it pleases you, oblivious to the disproportion of power in your relationship – or perhaps indulging in it, what with your refusal to recognise him. What is it Effie? Is it that he isn’t as rich or handsome as your former Simcoe? Is it because you fear that the only reason he can stand to be in a relationship with you is due to some shared genetic defect?”

“You can be such a fucking bitch.”

“Ouch,” Ellie rolled her eyes. “Be that as it may, I’m not the one misusing an innocent person and refusing to recognise the relationship insofar as to afford him any rights. Contracts of the kind Mary Anne speaks are not simply to protect people like us; they are in place to balance the power a bit. Percy deserves more than your hiding behind a menu in response to his presence. I am a little ashamed of you, if I am being honest. Here,” she slighted, pressing a hundred-pound note on the table, “that should cover the cheque.”

“That is too much. It is always too much with you.”

“And with you it will never be enough, will it? Ciao, Mary Anne. We’ll text.”

On their way out the door, Effie heard or imagined the princess telling Percy that he could do better, which was probably true.

“Maybe I should go after them,” she sighed.

Mary Anne shook her head. “You don’t want to take on Ellie when she is playing her preferred position. Don’t take it personally. It’s Thomas Robinson who she’s truly angry with and there are so few people in her life right now that she can express that to for reasons obvious, I think it safe to say she has forgotten how.”

“She is right though.”

Without recognising or responding to her concern, Mary Anne instead eyed the money laid out on the table and offered, “She left enough for dessert. What do you say we ignore Maggie’s cautions and forget about our expanding waistlines for the afternoon?”

Effie nodded, looked down and started tugging lightly at her clothes, worried that in addition to being old, grey and wrinkled she was gaining weight besides.

“What if it is a genetic problem that makes them find me attractive?”

“It isn’t,” Mary Anne sighed, “It is money and the power that it brings. For you, I think, it is stressing about turning thirty this year and feeling an arbitrary loss of it. So you are apparently dating a slightly younger version of your ex to get back part of the sensation of youth. I see it, Ellie sees it, don’t you?”

“You know I was actually going to download the Maggie app, but now I know I can just call you when I need to psych myself up for failure,” Effie sighed in defeat.
“Cheesecake then?”

>>What are you wearing?<< her lover whisper over the phone. It was eleven at night; Effie herself had just gotten home not a half hour before.

“Ooh, something sexy,” she purred, “an old tee-shirt and a pair of sweats. I fully intended to work off the desert I treated myself to this afternoon but after doing all of two crunches I decided that one per slice of cheesecake ought to do it.”

>>Sounds right.<< Percy laughed.

Effie took a deep breath. “Listen I … after Eleanor left the restaurant, did you by chance, did she well, say anything to you? I mean – about us?”

>>Us as in …<<

“Percy, I never meant to hurt you with all of my … I know how neurotic I can be. I don’t want to keep our relationship a secret, it … it just means too much to me to open it up to scrutiny. Ellie told me today that I don’t know what it is like to live under constant judgement the way she must, and I suppose that is true to an extent, and I know it is selfish to want to keep things that way, but they can’t be, forever, can they? It broke my heart this morning when you told me you didn’t even tell you mum my name after you had said …” she sniffed.

>>What?<<

“That they would love me.”

>>They will,<< Percy laughed nervously. >>Hey, don’t worry about that. You are perfect, babe. And look, about Ellie, I’m sure she will apologise when she gets back. Ban and Marie are in essence asking her to be Mary Robinson for them right now when with everything going on she needs to be Lady Eleanor Hewlett more than ever.<<

“Is she okay?”

>>I mean, it is not my place to say … you should probably ask her that. I am sure it would mean a lot if you did. But how about you, Effie? You’ve been a little … listen, last night, if I misread anything or crossed any lines I shouldn’t have -<<

“No. No, I mean, I’m … I am worried that my worries have made our relationship disproportional.”

>>Are you or is Mary Anne?<<

“Mary Anne and Ellie both and I’m worried they are right, that in my fool hearted attempt to keep the world away from what we have I’m going to push you away too, I mean, you wouldn’t even tell you mum my name.”

The line went silent for a long while. Effie stood up and began to pace, hearing her Aunt Margaret in the creaks in the floorboard her movement created. When women of her family were lost, they were want to wander. Effie worried as the silence grew that she had run out of places to go.

>>To be honest, it means a lot that you’d let me. It means a whole lot more than that that you want to
come celebrate the holidays with my family. Are you sure your aunt and uncle will be okay with it?

“I’m almost thirty,” Effie nearly laughed.

>>They still want to see you, I’m sure.<<

He was not getting out of this. Effie’s legs felt restless. Percy could not redact on his offer.

“My uncle has been trying to get my aunt to go on a cruise with him since he retired. I booked them a suite for a two-week voyage to see some fjords. They will be fine. Oh, that reminds me,” she raised her voice slightly, “should I bring a gift for your parents?”

>>Bottle of wine maybe? Don’t worry about it, I’ll sort it. Just bring your pretty smile and your appetite. My mum will take one look at you, decide that you are malnourished and spend the weekend trying to make up for it.<<

“That sounds fabulous.” Effie grinned, winking at herself in the mirror. Two crunches had defiantly been enough miserable exercise for one evening.

>>I have my doubts. I’ve never brought a girl home before, I’m worried my folks are going to fall into every cliché – pulling out the old photo albums, telling you with every picture something they remember as being adorable and I recall as painfully embarrassing.<<

“Like what?”

>>I did ballet for three years.<<

“No!”

>>No, you’re right, it was more like seven and at my own insistence. Ever seen a fat kid in a leotard?<<

“I really want to now,” she told him honestly, stifling a laugh.

>>I’m sure you will.<<

“I’m going to order an adult sized one on Amazon and demand a performance when you come back,” Effie taunted.

>>If you can find one to fit my torso I’d be obliged, my lady.<<

“By the way, what should I wear?”

>>For my dance recital? Nothing, they always tell you to picture the audience naked and I’ll be so focused on my form my fantasy might not be to task.<<

“To your parents' house!”

>>Nothing special … whatever you are comfortable in, really. It gets cold at night but my parents will probably have a fire going and the heat turned all the way up.<<

“It sounds so cosy.”

They talked until two in the morning, laughing over everything and nothing all the while. When Percy told her he had to go to bed loath though he was to hang up, Effie downloaded the Maggie
App on to her mobile.

“Aunt Margaret,” she asked. “Should I tell him I love him?”

Effie asked every night until she realized she already had her answer.

The next two weeks flew by. Before Effie knew it, she and Percy were pulling into the driveway of his parent’s townhouse. “It is charming!” she declared.

“Wait till you get inside.”

It was easily the most beautiful home on a street that was itself whimsical. Percy’s parents were clearly house-proud, and every detail Effie’s eyes could find seemed evident of hours dedicated to careful cultivation. It spoke to her aesthetic tastes and she suddenly found herself wishing she had brought at sketchpad and pallet.

“Look at all of the little flowers,” she squealed.

Her chauffeur smiled. “My dad owns a gardening shop. Show any interest and you’ll spend half the weekend there while he shows you every plant and try to get you to talk me into moving back to take up the family trade.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Percy blushed, perhaps spending a moment in a shared fantasy, however unrealistic, of a pretty house on a quiet suburban street far from grey fog and constant drizzle, concrete skylines and ugly neon lights. Effie felt at home in a place she had never before been. She felt at home whenever she was by Percy’s side.

“Wait,” she said as he moved to open the car door. “There is something I wanted to say, something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while now.”

“Sure?”

“Percy, I love you.”

He answered her with a long, deep kiss, parting only when they both because too sort of breath for their tangled tongues to sustain. “They are defiantly watching us,” Percy said. Effie looked back to the house and saw a curtain speed-close. She unbuckled her safety belt.

“Wait, let me get the door for you.”

“You, Sir, are not ‘on duty’ and certainly not to me.”

“You are a lady, more importantly, you are my lady and I insist on treating you as such.”

By the time they had opened the boot to remove their luggage, a sprightly little woman with deep laughter lines practically ran from the front porch stoop to embrace her enormous son.

“Percy, you father and I have missed you so, it has been too long, far too long!” she scolded before turning with a bright smile “And you must be Elizabeth! Come here, let me see you,” she said
pulling her into a tight hug. “You are even more beautiful than I had imagined – but oh! – So thin! Don’t they have any food in the City? Never mind that, I’ll send you back with a few recipes. Percy, you’ve never offered to cook for this poor girl? Pah! Forgive my son; forgive his absence of etiquette. Elizabeth, I’m told you are a writer and an accomplished painter?”

“I’m a journalist and uh … I dabble,” Effie blushed.

“Anything I might have seen?” Mrs Nantaba asked.

“Do you read The Daily Mail?”

“Mum, is Dad still at work?”

“Oh no – oh! He is in the living room with your uncle, the bottle of Laphroaig you sent us and a surprise for you!” she smiled. “Come, come!”

“It is probably my cousin Dembe,” Percy smiled as they hurried to keep pace with his adoptive mother. “She is studying in Belfast, so I wasn’t expecting -”

When their party turned the corner into the brightly painted living room, Effie in fact spotted a young woman who looked very much like the daughter of the man she sat beside. Excited though she was to meet Percy’s adoptive Pakistani-Ugandan family, her eyes were drawn to the one face in the room she would know anywhere.

“John,” she whispered.

“Effie?” Her ex asked as he stood. Percy looked on in utter shock.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Mrs Nantaba exclaimed, “I asked John to Easter and he was able to make it – all the way from New York. Bless.”

Effie Gwillim felt cursed.

The two brothers stood in the crowded living room against a chorus that sang out of tune. Everyone was so happy that the two Simcoe boys would finally be able to spend a holiday under the same roof that neither of them seemed to realise they were sizing each other up in the event that they should come to blows over the girl Percy had not thought to fully name. Effie had gestured for Dembe to meet her in the hall, an excuse to leave the room before her continued presence could create more contention.

“This is a little embarrassing,” she winced to the teen or early-twenty-something who towered a head above her. “You don’t happen to have a tampon, do you?”

“Oh! Sure I can check, follow me,” Dembe smiled, assuring her she understood. The two climbed the stairs together, Dembe chatting excitedly about Percy’s long lost brother from New York (“Small world, isn’t it? He is friends with Edmund Hewlett and Percy works for Lady Eleanor! What are the chances, right?”) From a school bag stuffed with clothing she handed Effie a tampon designed for the ‘light days’ of urban legend and pointed her to the WC.

Effie frowned at the little thing before shoving it in her purse. Glancing her reflection a moment later,
she wondered if John had truly recognized her at all. After a minute of searching for a pair of
tweezers she must have left behind in London where they could not combat the greys that had
multiplied tenfold since seeing the face and still-fit form of the man she had loved when he had been
a boy and she had been beautiful, Effie grabbed for her mobile.

“Aunt Margaret,” she whimpered, “I have a huge problem and I need your advice.”

A minute into her aunt’s lecture, Effie wished she had just used the app Ellie had shown her when
last they had met.

Chapter End Notes

From ‘Oh no!’ to ‘Oh, notes.’ let’s just dive straight in, shall we?

The Tarletons’ terriers and their rubbish names:
This brings us back quite a ways, but during his first stint at Chelsea FC “The Special
One” José Mourinho (my personal favourite fragile narcissist, I’m not even going to
front) was arrested after having purchased a Yorkshire Terrier aboard, bringing the
animal (who then ran away – this was quite a saga) into the UK. When researching the
past decade for ‘Joust’, I asked myself “What would a teenager with strong anti-
European sentiment and a pretty distinct sense of humour name a wee small dog?” I
found the answer fairly obvious. It just now strikes me how large a role personalities
from that era of the London club’s history must have played on the H+S interpretation
of Tarleton (his fight with John Terry has come up more than once. Hm. I could really
over-analyse this had I the mind to.) Pep was obviously named after Guardiola,
Mourinho’s nemesis. (Which the City gaffer likely laughs at. Diplomatically and in 17
languages, of course.)

Just in case you’ve forgotten in your hatred for Chelsea why you also hate Tarleton, let
me answer a question Ellie posed in the text with a quote from his first appearance on
the H+S stage. “What if Thomas’ lawyers pull the transcripts of his court martial in a
custody hearing?”
She had been present while he was interrogating two prepubescent ‘refugees’ with a
cattle prod. The first child shit out the bags of heroin he had swallowed. Then second
died when one exploded inside of him. He had never gotten to read the autopsy to
discover if this had anything to do with the high-voltage charge he had been applying to
the parts of the boy that determined his gender. Based on the reaction of his superiors,
however, it seemed that it did. Ohh … bad things, Ellie, bad things indeed. Might want
to give Mary Anne a proper heads up about that one.

Misc. Sport:
Everton: actually beat Brighton last weekend 2-0. I know, I am surprised too.

People of note:
Mayor of Liverpool Joe Anderson has had a few mentions in passing, but the incident
in the kabab shop was actually borrowed from the German news cycle a few months
back.
Donald Trump, Marine le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Benjamin Netanjahu
have all appeared in Hide and Seek itself. They are all the leaders of the conservative populist movements in their respective countries, and, excepting le Pen, are all in seats of power.

**Angela Merkel** [...] *only expressed condolences for disasters months after it would have been appropriate to do so.* To be fair, on Wednesday, Mutti had better things to do than get into a social media shitshow with an American intern. (As of the week, we no longer have an anarchy by the international definition given as “a country that has gone 100 days or more without a seated government.” I already miss it, rather, I miss being able to say that I live in an anarchical state sustained by bureaucratic tendencies. That was fun.)

**Rex Tillerson** was fired this week from his position as US Secretary of State, making him the twentieth casualty of the Trump Administration at top level. (Hope Hicks and Gary Cohn were the other two senior staffers whose names Effie had no energy to conjure up whist at work.)

Speaking of spots in US government, I’ve unapoplectically swapped out James Mattis for Benedict Arnold and Neil Gorsuch for Richard Woodhull because it works within context. No disrespect is meant to these men and their respective offices.

**Mary I** who reigned England and Ireland form 1553-1558 is known to history (and school aged children who want to freak themselves out) as “Bloody Mary” for her aggressive attempt to reverse the English Reformation. She was England’s last Catholic queen.

As always, thanks for reading!

Up Next: Effie’s problems worsen with her attempts to solve them.
An Impression

Chapter Summary

Effie, finding herself all but friendless, relies on the input of a fifty-five year old and a fifteen year old to help her find perspective. Simcoe grows suspicious of Percy’s intentions toward his ex. Both risk ruining the relationships they came to Leicester in search of when teatime turns hostile.

Chapter Notes

I’m sure I am the last to this party, but if you are bored at work and find you’re A03 options exhausted (evident, in your having clicked on the second chapter of the work of art) throw a google on “Merkel popelt” – there are so many image results of Mutti picking her nose it is glorious. I can’t really explain why this is fascinating to me but it is the best thing I have seen this week. Thought I would pass it on. ;)

Um … yeah, so, this chapter sees two old people in the throes of wild lust and a teenage girl trying (not) to deal with her mother’s terminal illness. But then, I imagine by now you have come to expect such topics to come up in any upbeat family comedy I’d think to pen. Nepotism, Chelsea FC, David Hasselhoff and media manipulation all get mentions, too.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It seemed to many that Margaret Spinkels had the perfect marriage. Aggressively single until her mid-forties, the editor of Vogue’s UK edition was in her private life every bit as successful and self-assured as her public personal would otherwise suggest. When asked, she typically credited her career path for the ‘warmth’ of her hearth – something said doubtlessly with an ironic understanding. Before deciding to share herself, she ‘had come into her own without the unnecessary and unhelpful influence of a man whom the entire social structure informed her it was her duty to please.’

She and her husband Admiral Samuel Graves never fought. Their marriage was often described as being ‘happy’.

This, however, was not for any lack of effort on Margaret’s part.

The two had first met fifteen years prior at an open day at the boarding school both of their wards were attending. In uniform, Samuel had found fault with everything – the students, the teachers, the curriculum, the security, the conditions of the sporting fields. Though they had hardly exchanged a word with one another, Margaret Spinkels, feminist icon, had found herself in the particularly odd predicament of being smitten. When she saw the unsatisfied admiral again at a wedding the following summer, she asked him for a dance. He instead brought her a drink, which dictated the evening’s tone. Somewhere between mutually deciding that happiness was wasted on the young, that this union was in the political interests of both the bride and groom’s fathers (and weren’t they both
dreadful!), that the food was terrible and the music far worse, Margaret found herself in the throes of desperate love and lustful longing. After a hundred ‘I don’t-s’ she promised Samuel ‘I do’ that very same winter.

For a time, Margaret Spinkels had in fact been as ‘happy’ as disposition allowed, never quite smiling behind her dark designer shades that masked half her face and most of her wrinkles, but content all the same to take the arm of the widower who had extended it. Their union had been a success, even by her high standards.

But that was all past.

Since his retirement from the Royal Navy, Samuel Graves had never offered a hint of contention. Without a fleet to command, he was patronising, personable, almost pleasant.

He was dull and she was dry. When she looked at him, she felt her heart shatter. Margaret had lost her equal when he had surrendered his command. There were times when she worried that the same would become of her when she went into pension. Samuel’s smile was something akin to death. She made a point of keeping long hours at the office if only to avoid the joys of domestic life.

Had Margaret known that the simple act of getting on a boat would bring the man she had fallen in love with back to her, she would have invested in a yacht of her own. Before getting a call from her niece, she had been searching the internet to see if such a ship were up for sale - preferably large, used, and prone to the sorts of small problems that she had seen set Samuel off since the security briefing the passengers all had to stand on deck to hear before departure. ‘This was wrong’, ‘that was wrong’, ‘this was a hazard’, ‘that a violation’ – it was as though they again spoke the same language. Margaret was sad to say bon voyage again quite so soon.

“You are free to stay aboard,” she told her husband as she folded another sweater back into her luggage. “But Elizabeth clearly needs my help and -”

“No, she most certainly does not,” he informed her sharply. Margaret smiled, if only ever so briefly and only to herself.

“I think it doubtful that my godson is going to do anything to jeopardise his relationship with his biological brother or Percy’s adoptive family,” Samuel continued. Though not facing him as he spoke, Margaret could feel his posture stiffen in the sudden chill of the cabin’s air.

“Well then the character of John Graves Simcoe is completely lost on you, darling,” she snorted. “I saw and said what a devil he was from the first we met -”

“Will you let it alone, Margaret?” he nearly yelled. Looking into her suitcase, Margaret Spinkels relocated the silk slip with lace detail she had bought on a whim and first worn for her husband the night before. After dangling it on her manicured fingertips for his inspection, she unzipped her dress, letting the garment fall to the floor. Before she could replace it with slightly soiled lingerie, she felt Samuel’s hands hesitate into her knickers. He held her from behind, kissing the back of her neck in a way that ceased all other sensations as pleasure tingled through her. Freeing herself from his strong embrace, she turned to meet his face – bloated and blotchy as ever, but handsome to her all the same. “I’m flying back to England when we reach Oslo, she whispered, shoving him back towards the bed. “Fancy a trip with me to the Midlands?”

He frowned. Samuel was so beautiful in these rare moments of bellicosity that Margaret found herself quite surprisingly siding with Simcoe in his row with Elizabeth, regardless of what the boy’s stance might be. She and her husband had had quite a bit of fun whilst fighting over the conduct of their respective wards in the past. He kissed her in a way the suggested her shared her sentiment.
“You’ll come to make sure I stay calm, won’t you?” she purred.

“I’ll come because I am relatively certain this ‘luxury ocean liner’ is destined to sink.”

He went on to tell her several things he had noticed were wrong with the ship and its crew since last they had spoken of it whilst she stripped him bare.

Margaret Spinkels, who had kept her name at the altar, kept her stilettoes on in the act. When she returned to Britain, she thought all the while, she would simply have to buy herself a boat.

It was not silent, Simcoe imagined. It was that no one was speaking. The collective sound of drizzle, the hum of household electronics in use, of stirring sugar into tea and sipping ever so hesitantly for taste, these things, thing of which no one would be aware were there anything to occupy them, caused the other more discomfort than were the room as quiet as it was for him.

Without any particular concern for temperature assaulting his tongue, he took a sip from his cup and smiled, complimenting Dembe with a mute gesture on her ability to boil water and arrange packaged biscuits on a serving tray while waiting for the tea bags to transfer their weak flavour to the warm liquid. The girl smiled back before returning to her constant state of longing, looking at him with wide eyes and inquiring into everything which one might associate with New York. Of all of the Nantabas, she was fast and by far becoming his favourite, for though she forced him to present his more mundane experiences in a way that conformed to her fancies, she did not pose any personal questions. John Graves Simcoe had a past he would rather leave forgotten, and she was sitting directly across from him, staring at the phone in her lap in a way that failed digression, frightened to make eye contact.

“How did we meet?” Simcoe peeped up for Percy in response to his mother’s inquiry. “Well, Effie and I met back at school. Her roommate and my roommate were friends, you see. Oh. Oh! You meant Percy and Effie, yes, of course. If I am not mistaken, you met at Edmund Hewlett’s wedding, did you not?”

Both looked at him with wide, pleading eyes which met with Simcoe’s satisfaction. It was, to his mind, a very rude thing to stare at one’s mobile during afternoon tea. “Yes, yes of course,” he continued. “How could I forget? You, Percy – responded to Effie’s uncovering of our relation by quite nearly … well, you knew beforehand, did you not? You must tell me, was it truly worth entering into Lady Eleanor’s employ in hopes that an opportunity would arise in which you and I might meet? And you, Effie, dearest, was that your motivation for sneaking around with my baby brother? You do both realise that I do often check my mobile if you are keen to keep in touch – though, I am not keen to stare at it while enjoying tea with such splendid company as the Nantaba family. I have always found such rather … rude, if I may say.”

“That is enough John,” Effie told him between clenched teeth.

“Actually, I was about to ask if I might treat myself to another cup,” Simcoe said as he reached for the decorative tea pot the family likely only brought out on special occasions. Mrs Nantaba – who insisted he call her Zainab – begged him to allow her. She gave him a cheeky grin as she poured. The small woman was clearly taken aback by Effie’s coldness and seemed to enjoy the snide more than she ought.
Simcoe was not enjoying himself at all. The girl he had grown up loving looked woefully miserable. It did not register with him that such could correlate to his presence, rather, since first seeing her in this unexpected setting, his suspicions towards Percy found new purchase.

As much as John had always dreamed of having a family and Percy had longed to find the one he had been born to, neither brother wanted their story to be true. Percy had discovered his adoptive origins long after logic might instruct, at eight when the mother of a visiting schoolmate mistook Mrs Nantaba for the housemaid. The only mother he had ever expected himself to have had told him then that she had found him abandoned in a latrine on a work-related trip to her native Pakistan, had brought him to hospital and, eventually, back to the UK. He had not believed her at the time, his doubts only increasing when her story did not alter with his age.

Percy had been born too small. Perhaps in a subconscious effort to combat what must have been a traumatic memory, Zainab had always been given to over-feeding him. By fifteen, Simcoe reasoned, he had surely been fat enough that little room existed for sad memories to fill. Per his own recollection, Percy was large, lonely, and had supposed his mum wished him to stay that way, dependant on her company and cooking for the whole of his life. Having nothing else to go on, he studied the story on which he had been nursed, finding, to his complete surprise, that it shared some commonality with that of an army engineer who had been stationed in the region at the time. He had separated from his wife—a former ballet dancer, as little Percy had long dreamed of being, figure notwithstanding—after she had lost a child in her seventh month. Both had since died, leaving John their sole heir.

Perhaps Percy had always wanted a brother. Perhaps he initially wanted parts of his narrative to be true, wanting to identify pieces of himself within it. He had seemed a rather whimsy sort, that was, until John met him with the suspicion that the boy was after another sort of enrichment. As quickly as Percy’s narrative had been relayed, John had intended to deny him both his illusions and the idea that he meant to pay for his company.

He filled his supposed baby brother in on the details that failed his research. John had been in the explosion that had taken their father. It was the reason he wore a hearing aid now, why he spoke as he did. He had been in the house when their mother had taken her life. His own had left him bitter, empty, and self-admittedly with seemingly nothing better to do than argue with Edmund Hewlett over association football.

Though two hours under Mr and Mrs Nantaba’s roof told John that Percy’s gripe with his adoptive parents for being far too placating and overbearing was fully warranted, his brother had grown up in a loving home. John wished he had returned to it alone this Easter, rather than in the company of Effie Gwillim. Effie, who said she loved him while looking into her lap.

Percy never asked him for any part of his inheritance as John had well expected him to. After the DNA test results came back positive, perhaps to the dismay of both men, they hardly spoke. Zainab Nantaba was the reason they had reconnect, she was not the sort of woman one refused, in person or over Skype. John had developed a certain fondness for his brother over the past two years, failing to inquire into much about his personal life for political reasons.

This, he saw, had been a grievous mistake on his part. Ellie Gwillim, the girl he had once planned to wed, was under his spell in a far worst sense than Simcoe suspected Percy of being under Tarleton’s. It was a clever move, perhaps one the bodyguard had picked up from his boss were Simcoe generous enough to distribute the blame. Percy was not after any bit of his wealth, he wanted the full of Effie’s far more considerable fortune.

Simcoe swallowed another sip of lukewarm Lady Grey. His brother had taken the heart of his first
love; the only treasure he had ever valued. While he knew he had no hope of winning her back, Effie remained one of the finest ladies in the land. He could not watch her claimed by such an ogre.

“So, I suppose we have you to blame for Percy’s relocation to London?” Mr Nantaba - the brother of the Mr Nantaba whom Percy called dad – asked lightly, jokingly. Effie seemed tense.

“Um,” she mumbled. “It is not as though he moved to the City for me, we, well we knew each other but we didn’t – that is, we began seeing one another, socially that is, only at the start of the season. The football season. Charlotte Wessex owns a property, you see, that stands in the way of Chelsea’s expansion plans. Roman Abramovich offered her six million for it, but she won’t sell for under twenty and the two are locked in a standoff. To add insult to injury she and the building’s current residents threw a sort of party the first home match of the season – we could see part of the field from the balcony and – if I remember correctly –we even made it on television. Percy was not working – not directly, and neither of us had much interest in the spectacle, so we snuck away, talked for hours,” she began to gush, smiling girlishly. Simcoe felt ill.

“But you are the one who keeps building up Ban Tarleton in the press,” someone accused.

“You are the reason he was elected in the first place.”

“Percy would not live in London if not for you.”

“Mum,” Percy said. “Stop it, please. Liverpool is all of six minutes closer to Leicester than London is; it isn’t as though I am further from home. And whatever you may think of the Mail, Effie is …” he trailed off, perhaps realising he had no hopes of holding his position. Effie looked down at her lap again. Simcoe thought of the justification the Americans had given for dropping an atomic bomb. The war had to be quickly and decidedly concluded to avoid worse casualties. With this in mind, he re-joined the cavalry charge. He would save her from Percy and spare her from what he was certain would otherwise only amount to sorrow. He had mistrusted his brother before he had been given reason to; now, he was ready for a fight whatever form it may take.

“Should we Ban Tarleton from holding public office?” Effie repeated, her eyes narrowing. Whatever John’s sudden criticism of her journalistic career, she found it extremely offensive that he and the Nantabas were keen to pretend that the headline was not the best use of name based punning ever put to print. “That was nominated for a Pulitzer!” she defended.

“And Tarleton won a seat in Parliament – thanks to you – with seventy-eight percent of the vote.”

“Seventy-eight percent?” John sneered. “Seems rather Putin-esque. Rather Totalitarleton,” he smiled and apologised for his ‘Freudian slip’ when laughter erupted. Effie maintained her joke had been better. She looked back at her phone. None of her friends had texted her back and her Aunt Margaret’s advice had been unhelpful. She did not need a man, but as her situation stood, she had one she fear losing to this onslaught of Simconian criticism. >>Ban, pleaseeee!<< she typed, having few other people with whom she was on speaking terms whose personal and professional lives were so often under attack.

“Fine, I’ll take the credit. Let that serve as testament to the power of the fourth estate,” she smiled at her friend turned foe.

“As well we should,” John agreed. “The fact that we are even talking about bread and circuses is
“I would personally argue that Tarleton’s achievements owe themselves to nepotism,” Dembe asserted. “I have a friend from school from Liverpool and she says that everyone in Merseyside who isn’t related to them by blood is related by business.”

“Well, yeah because the Hewletts are a huge employer in the region.”

“Effie Gwillim owns fifty-one percent of the company.”

“Is that true?”

“Would you stop?” Percy pleaded with the two other women at the table. “It is as if you forget I am employed by the Hewletts.”

“Oh, no one forgets that, love,” John assured him. “What impresses me though is that Effie -who doesn’t even believe in democracy- took it upon herself to influence an election.”

This was true. It also was not the sort of thing one said completely sober or to near strangers. “What a pack of nonsense,” Effie dismissed, returning to her cold tea. When she reached for the pot, she noticed that Mrs Nantaba, who had not invited her to address her by her first name as she had John, also did not insist on pouring for her.

Occasionally, her father made attempts to explain particulars of operating a motor vehicle, ignoring her headphones as he always did. Marie Robinson sometimes responded that she thought he was going to let her drive, to which ‘Not on the motorway.’ and ‘Not in holiday traffic.’ only prompted longer bouts of silence on the part of teenager, for whom the promise of the wheel had seemed the one redeeming aspect of the family reunion so unwelcomely forced upon her. She wanted to go up to Scotland to see Georgie as they always had, to go on holiday the way her friends got to, to be anywhere, anywhere at all save for the passenger seat of the wrong side of an old sedan.

The worst of it was that music streaming apps only worked with Wi-Fi.

“Can’t you do anything about the fact that we in Britain in the year of our Lord twenty-eighteen have limited mobile service on the M1?”

“Nothing that would not take eighteen months of meetings to determine if it would be in the public’s interest,” he dad answered, “then another half a year of negotiating with various local government on compensation packages that they might create business conditions that would prompt internet providers to invest more in less densely populated areas.”

“So ‘no’, or ‘yes’ in the way that you said I could drive -”

“I said you could practice in Aunt Emma’s drive way when we get to the farm. Pay attention, right now I am going to attempt to overtake this lorry, but what need I do first?”

‘Signal’ Marie did not answer, instead sinking deeper into her seat in the archaic American import, an embarrassment in every sense. It was the only sort of car her godfather and for-now legal guardian was capable of operating, having lost use of his right hand in a war that the public had stopped caring about long before her memories had begun. The American car was an automatic; he need not shift
gears or choose between doing that and steering. Still, they hardly ever drove anywhere, riding around London in unmarked vehicles paid for by the taxpayers or by her god- and sort-of-stepmother. It allowed Marie the illusion that her guardians were not quite as annoying or painfully awkward as two hours in a Ford Escort had shown them to be. Marie heard her dad strike up another argument with whatever boring podcast he was listening to instead of music. Ellie, sprawled out in the back seat, covered in papers, portable electronic devices and sleeping puppies (who for their part may have allowed her, at least, the idea that she was ‘not working’ as she had promised), laughingly asked him to turn it up. Marie rolled her eyes, wondering at how adults all seemed to hold such boring interest. It would not serve hers to ask. It would only show that she was not, as she was pretending, listening to music on her borrowed phone and might go as far as to invite the ‘grown ups’ to include her in the discussion they were having over the one being reported about some Chinese insurance firm that Beijing had repossessed thanks to unstable short term assets and – whatever. She did not care and she was confident she never would. Glancing at her dad, she was reasonably satisfied that he had even less of an idea what ‘The Economist’ was ‘Ask’-ing than whomever was being interrogated.

Her phone made a noise that served to startle. Finally, she said as softly as prayer, finally she could use Spotify – for however long that would last. Marie looked at the cars in front of them, determined they would be in this particular location for some considerable time, and was readying to open the music steaming app when her dad glanced over.

“It is Susan and Rachel,” she lied without having read the series of text alerts she was receiving in rapid fire. “I switched the SIM-card out like you asked.” She had not.

“I’m glad you girls aren’t fighting anymore,” Ellie said. They were, Marie frowned, wanting to call her surrogate mother-figure on her own hypocrisy – she had been refusing to speak to Effie Gwillim since returning from Liverpool a week before. Marie could not say so without alerting her guardians to the lies she had spent the morning engaged in constructing. Not wanting to risk talking to the other people in the car, she returned to the mobile she had borrowed to listen to music, expecting to see one of her uncles complaining about another, expecting to see her mum wondering at the overtures her ex was making on her behalf, or some other base concern she could elect to either ignore or exploit, something, probably, work related. Maybe the American president had finally gotten round to declaring nuclear war on North Korea’s glorious leader and her dad was being required to get himself to a bunker that Britain could ensure that their post-apocalypse government was as ineffective as the one it had currently. That, to Marie’s mind, would be a blessing. At least she would not have to spend the Easter holiday in Liverpool with the Tarletons.

>>Ban, pleaseeeeee.<< a new text read. Marie wondered if her sort-of-step-dad was having another torrid affair or if, instead, he decidedly was not. Aunt Effie? she questioned, opening the chat labelled ‘Elizabeth Gwillim – DM’, so formal, so unfamiliar. ‘Pleaseeeeee,’ she heard in her mind in a decidedly posh accent - whiny and coquettish, girlish and altogether gross. Suddenly, she wanted to cry.

“Dad, can we pull over at the next rest area,” she choked. “I have to pee.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier – we, o’rite. Yea. There is one coming up in,” he glanced at the navigation system, twelve miles – are you going to be alright until then?”

“Sure,” Marie said.

“Everything alright, kiddo?” he frowned.

“I just have to pee. That’s it.”
This, too, was a lie and Ban Tarleton seemed to know it, though, thankfully, he did not press the matter. They had nothing left to say to one another and, to Marie’s mind, she had nothing at all she felt like discussing with anyone in the car. It would be one thing to spend Easter with her dad’s family – except Ban was not really her dad, and, maybe in reaction to this, he was insisting that her mother join them for Sunday dinner as well. Of all the adults Marie was enthralled in actively hating with a passion, her mother topped the list. She was presently staying at a clinic, making apologetic overtones at the man to whom she had been married for the past twenty-odd years and expecting – somehow- for Marie to follow suit. But Marie did not know this legal father whose name had barely come up until the doctors had determined her mother’s cancer to be terminal. She did not want to know him now. She did not want to have to move from London to Wales in accordance with what she speculated may just be her mother’s dying wish. She did not want to finish her education away from her friends and the family she had known all her life. Thomas Robinson was not her ‘real’ father, he was not even her biological father insofar as anyone knew, and she had no desire to know him in any sense.

She had a dad already and, at the moment, she hated him just as much.

A week ago, Ban Tarleton had confessed to her that he would not have married Ellie Hewlett when he did had he known that her mother, his long-time mistress, was as sick as she was, as though that made a difference. It made Marie sad. Her mum and Ellie had been friends all her life; moreover, she herself and Ellie had always been close. Recently that was not the case. She would laugh with her sort-of-step-mum over something stupid that had happened at college, Ellie would stop abruptly, worried that she was overstepping some invisible boundary - that she was being asked to play a role in which she had not been cast. It was not fair. Marie did not need a new mum any more than she needed a new dad - she needed an old friend, however. But now things between her and Ellie were weird in ways she did not really understand.

Weirder still, she thought, was that everyone was so eager to pretend everything was normal. In a few hours, she feared she would be sitting with her dad’s extended family, talking about some disruption to the Chinese economy, or about how disappointed they all were in Sam Allardyce’s tenure at Everton, or about how wonderful it was to get to sit down together and talk about all the other things they had nothing to do with. Sunday would come and so would her mum and her new (old) husband. Marie would overhear her aunts cursing amongst themselves in the kitchen about the situation while in Mary’s presence making polite overtures in hopes of convincing her what a good and proper family they were, as though her mum weren’t an actress who knew a show when she saw one. This, at best, would be a poor piece of community theatre. At worst, her mother would discover that for all of the pageantry, Ban Tarleton’s life was unstable as it had always been. He was having an affair with Effie Gwillim. That, Marie reasoned, was surely the reason Ellie and Effie weren’t speaking. That was why Effie had tried to sneak out of their house without shoes on a few weeks ago. Oh, how she hated her, too.

“Will we be there soon?” Marie pouted. She intended to toss the phone into a rubbish bin or simply drop it on the pavement as she had her own that morning (albeit without the explicit intention of doing so.) As much as she did not want to participate in the bullshit of having dinner with all of her parents and the assorted company there primarily to force the four of them to behave, she did not want her mum to find another erroneous reason as to why she couldn’t just stay living with Ban as she practically always had. He was a terrible person in so many ways - not the least of which was what he was doing with Effie behind his good wife’s back – but he was an excellent father, even if he would not let her drink coffee, stay out on a school night or practice driving on the motorway. Marie Robinson was already losing one parent, she could not process the thought of having to let them both go, that her mother had somehow come to want such a thing for her.

“Five more minutes, should I just pull over? I have some tissues in the glove box, you could -“
“No I can wait. Thanks.”

Marie looked back to the conversation on her dad’s phone with ‘Elizabeth Gwillim – DM’, scrolling up, intending to forward nudes or whatever gross thing to her own phone along with any number of contact information to other members of the press. Thinking better on it, she elected to just to tell Effie she was going to do these things, blackmailing her father’s latest strumpet to stay away until her future housing arrangement had been sorted.

>>It is Marie. Stop texting! I am going to screen cap everything ur sending my dad and send it to ALL of your competitors if you don’t leave him alone!!!<<

Seconds later, she saw that Elizabeth Gwillim, Editor-in-Chief of The Daily Mail was in the process of writing a lengthy response.

>>Why would you do that? Please Marie, will you give Ban the phone? I really need his advice.<<

>>He is not interested. He is *married to your best friend*<<

>>WHAT?>>


>>Marie!<<

>>No!<<

>>There is nothing going on between Ban and I, how could you even think that? I would never, ever, under any circumstances even consider your father in that sense. I just need his advice on a problem.<<

>>Sorry – My dad’s advice? You have any idea how fake that sounds?>>

>>Fair.<<

Effie sent her a smiley face with its tongue sticking out. Marie rolled her eyes. Old people did not know how to use emoji effectively. She scrolled up, looking for things to screen cap.

>>You are dating Percy???>?
She responded upon discovering to her relief that she had it wrong.

>>And you used to date John?<<

>>OMFG<<

>>Ur gross.<<

>>It is making Easter horrible.<<

Please, give the phone to your dad.<<

>>He is driving.<<

>>You know what he would say though?<<

Marie looked at her dad and suddenly missed her mum more than she could bear. She remembered when she was nine, finding her parents in the living room and being told that they needed to have a family talk. Marie had assumed her teacher had phoned after catching her letting Susan copy from her workbook – or had it been the other way around? She could not remember anything but bursting into tears, which made her parents cry as well. Then they told her that in a few months she would have a new baby brother or sister because of something her father had done in Scotland which neither seemed willing to define. Marie had not cared much for strokes or their poor system of delivery (why would it bring the baby to Edinburgh when they were all here?) but found the idea of having a sibling somewhere brilliant all the same. John, she wrote Effie, probably felt the same way she did.

She understood things a bit better now that she was older, of course, but she loved Georgie all the same and Kolina was by far the coolest fake-aunt she had. When she was twelve, her mum and dad separated, and for this, too, they had sat her down and explained the situation together as gently as they might. Marie had been determined that nothing would change even if her mum and dad had ‘grown apart’ and ‘no longer loved one another the same as they once had’. They still loved her, and that, for Marie, was more than sufficient. Her dad was often away on business anyway, and she later felt she saw him more that he was no longer living with them in London, making an effort to visit every other weekend. Her sister remained in Scotland, so this seemed fair.

Then, when she was thirteen, her parents sat her down once more to explain that her dad was going to marry Ellie Hewlett, which had not struck Marie as strange at all. Her mother was seeing someone new and that was what happened when people broke up. This, too, she wrote to Effie, adding what she told her mum and dad at the time:

>>You need to get over yourselves.

You’re not that special.<<

>>Hope that helps.<<

>>It does, actually.<<

Effie responded.

Marie tried to smile but began to cry. She wished her parents would sort things out now, that they would sit her down in the living room and tell her that she could keep living with her dad, or that the
cancer was gone and her mum was coming back to the city and that they could all move back to One
Hyde Park. “Wouldn’t it be perfect?” Marie sobbed without offering her worried guardians any
explanation. “We could all live in the old building and then we wouldn’t have any problems at all. I
could spend the night with you and Ellie or Mum and Thomas – if she really wants that – and I’m
sorry, I’m so sorry that I don’t I just … but it would be better. And Percy could go sleep in Effie’s
penthouse at night and Ellie and Effie would have to be friends again because they would only be an
few storeys from each other. And Rachel lives there, too, and we could all have sleepovers like we
used to. Me and Rachel and Effie and Ellie and Mum. And then if you or Mum ever both had to sign
something from school I could just – she is going to get better, she has to – so you’ll consider it,
won’t you? Consider it and sit down with me at Easter and just say that is what is going to happen
because it is the only logical thing that can happen and if you want I’ll pretend that you and Mum
came up with it first.”

“Kiddo, we can’t simply -”

“You can! You can’t pretend that things are fine like they are because they aren’t and you can’t
expect me to pretend that either. You and Mum have always done your best for me, I know that and
I am grateful, I am, but now it is as though you can’t even bloody well try,” she choked. “Get over
yourself, Dad.”

“You need to stop,” Effie hissed when she had him cornered by the water closet. “You … John, you
already broke my heart once – I won’t let you interfere here.” He looked sullen and she well knew
his black moods could last for days. She swallowed, “I think you need to get over yourself if you
can’t get over – whatever it is you think to blame me for. I’m in love with Percy. You are ruining the
relationship I’d hoped to build with his parents -”

“Me?” John gestured to himself. “Effie … I sympathise. While I often feel myself out of place in
social settings, this is the first time you’ve ever been in a town home isn’t it? Sat to tea with the
proletariat?”

“What is wrong with you?” she demanded.

“Oh – I’m not the one who made this about class, of which we could speak … but I am certain you
have an app for that. Everyone seems to. You should hear the sorts of things the lads think to ask
your ‘Aunt Maggie’,” he smiled, “but I digress. You can’t giggle and tell stories about moguls
arguing over more money than people like the Nantabas can’t so much as comprehend of.
Abramovich… Wessex … Hewlett, for that matter, it is tasteless.”

“I … hadn’t thought of that,” Effie admitted. “John you have to help me, please. Please help me
salvage this.”

“No,” he shifted meanly.

“No?”

“Effie I don’t know how to say this – understand I have no wish to hurt you in any way, but Percy is
clearly using you. Either because he wants your wealth directly, or sees you as a bargaining chip
with me -”

“And you lecture me about money and class!” she exploded before turning on a heel. “Help me fix
this, or leave. Leave me alone. Leave me forever like you always planned to. Go back to your stupid American friends and their -” she stopped in her tracks, hearing hated accents to which John was by now accustom coming from the kitchen.

- I never talk about it because no matter what polling data say I refuse to believe Le Pen as a legitimate concern. Look at the last three French presidents – Sarkozy – short. 'Olland – short. Macron – also short! It is as though their primary aim in selecting a leader is finding the one who most resembles Napoleon in a physical sense.--

--If that is your honest assessment.--

--It is. Full stop.--

-- Right. With that ladies and gentlemen, let’s take a quick commercial break. When we come back, our third topic this week – is David Hasselhoff’s admission that he had nothing to do with the collapse of the Berlin Wall indicative of America’s decline on the global stage? Aberdeen and I sit down with special guest, former German defence minister Frederick von Steuben to discuss. Stay tuned.--

“How does this show get so many noteworthy guests?” Zainab Nantaba muttered of the podcast she had playing from her niece’s laptop on the kitchen table as she continued to remove the entire contents of her refrigerator and place it onto the kitchen counter, or so it seemed to Effie who peeked at the two through a crack. “Don’t you edit this show?” she mouthed to John who had stopped behind her. “Edmund,” he whispered. “Did they really get an interview with the former Verteidigungsminister?” she squinted.

“I think the pub it is recorded from just has Bundesliga,” Dembe shrugged in response to her aunt from behind the door. John nodded the accuracy of this statement.

“Why the sudden interest in the opinions of two American college students over world politics?” the girl continued.

“It is the most Daily Mail type-show I could find in your library. I was embarrassed out there! I think Miss Gwillim looks down on us.”

“See?” John seemed to taunt.

“I don’t think that is the problem.”

“She is a high born lady! I don’t know what to cook! I thought – I thought we might finally have a lovely weekend, together as a family with John and Percy, and you of course, sweetheart. But this Elizabeth of his is so hard to please and it is putting everyone on edge and I thought – it I could just make her comfortable, we might -”

“You know John used to date her, right?”

“I didn’t. Did Percy?” Mrs Nantaba asked, her jaw dropping.

“Yep.”

“Oh no. Oh no, no.”

“Aunt Zainab, I really don’t think you need to adjust the menu – just cook whatever you planned on and … maybe don’t try to talk about politics?”
“What, so they can go back to fighting over this girl – with – forgive me, but rather poor manners? Looking to her phone the whole while as though she is too important for us!”

Effie wanted to weep and felt she was very near to losing the battle she now waged with her watering eyes. When she and Percy had driven up to the house, she had felt as though she had somehow been transported into the gardens she imagined as a girl, filling her notebooks and covering her walls with vivid watercolour landscapes to contradict the drudgery that defined the school grounds. Percy had grown up in the sort of world she dreamed of, in the sort of family John had always longed for. She had been so close to being part of that, to looking through old photo albums with his mother and laughing at what an adorable little lad Effie was certain her lover had been. Now, she had ruined any chance of that, and any chance that John might recover the hopes that surely had brought him back to the United Kingdom. She should have looked to him, rather than her mobile, for help. In the end, Effie was certain they both wanted the same thing out of this experience.

“So why do you care about impressing her? She and Percy are obviously going to break up over this -”

Effie sniffed.

“I don’t want your cousin – my son – to be at odds with his biological brother. Not over a girl like that. Whatever else she may be, she is rude.”

Turning to find John’s chest, she fell into his embrace, burying her face in his chest to mute her sobs. “You have to help me,” she begged.

“Aunt Zainab – you cannot control these things. But you can make Keema as you promised me you would!”

“Not with goat. I didn’t think on it, she probably won’t -”

“Then let her perish! Jesus H!”

“She can be a poor guest if she so chooses but that is no reason for me to be a bad host. She is clearly not open to trying new things, two brothers form the same family and I –I didn’t know! I didn’t know! And now I don’t know what to cook.”

“Shh,” John consoled her, as she knew she needed. He felt so familiar until he felt so far away. Pushing her against the wall by the side the door opened into, he gave her a smile she was not sure that she could trust.

“Can I be of any assistance?” he asked the ladies of the house as he moved to join them in the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Sim-nooooo!(tes?) But of course!

**Austerity Chelsea:** here is the real story behind the property with a 6 million pound offer against a 20 million pound price tag – it is a private fairly home in which the
owners have been living for over fifty years, standing inconveniently in the way of the blues’ expansion. To expand myself a bit on tying a bunch of football narratives into the H+S universe, if Charlotte Wessex gets her asking price, she will turn around and give at least £15m of it to Everton in response to the mayor’s call “for investigation into the circumstances around the transfer of Ross Barkley between Everton and Chelsea.” Joe Anderson, by the way, is also using his office to lend the Toffees £280m from the city’s coffers to build their new stadium. The 2018 Tarletons would be all up in support of this.

**Anbang Insurance:** the story Marie is referring to is the sudden fall of the insurance firm that saw record breaking growth in recent years. Former chairman Wu Xiaohui contests all charges of embezzlement. **The Economist Asks** (a podcast in which Anne McElvoy asks the same question of an academic repeatedly until they admit to their errors) has yet to do a story on this insofar as I can remember, though the parent company has done a great deal of reporting in the matter in the past few days.

**A comparative height chart of the aforementioned French leaders:** Sarkozy 1’66, Holland 1’70, Macron 1’75, Napoleon 1’69 – Marine Le Pen is 1’74. 1’77 is the French average for men, 1’64 for women.

**News you can’t use:** The David Hasselhoff story is real. After reporting it about a week ago, Germany’s worst radio station (RPR1) played *Looking for Freedom* in the most … I have no idea what the rest of the world made of this, but I imagine H+S Frederick von Steuben shaming the stereotype while at the same time turning up his stereo. Before you ask, he is probably a Gladbach* fan with the < B > tattoo somewhere on his body … but where? ;) I will leave that to your digression.

*This isn’t entirely random, Borussia is the Latin name for Prussia, he would support a first division side and by god it would not be Dortmund.

Thanks for reading!
Up next: Ain't Nuthin but a (Maggie) G Thang (as long as I am putting old songs in your head …)
A Breakdown

Chapter Summary

Effie and Percy try to help a few friends out of a bad situation, but no good deed goes unpunished as they are about to discover.

Chapter Notes

Remember how the last chapter of *Hide and Seek* was so tiering and tedious that it was impossible to get through in a single sitting (and quite possibly felt like a chore to return to)? You think I would have learned my lesson at least in terms of length, but nope, no – I am at it again, this time in the form of family-fluff, or my best imitation of the genre. Think of this as about the forty-minute mark on a Sunday night ZDF Herzkino that you have on because nothing else is. That answer to why you are watching no longer seems sufficient. You look again to your phone, ignoring the poorly-acted Rosamunde Pilcher or Inga Lindström in favour of (… this is more of a H+S trope but why not, I’m in the mood for it) something far better than this low-set bar:

This first recommendation is so old that it is barely a stretch to say that it is likely what Washington was watching in Valley Forge (you know, if Americans followed soccer.) Still, it is my favourite TV show of all time and as such *Special 1 TV* deserves a share. (I can’t find a playlist or an own channel, so this is just a random episode, you can use the side bar to view others.) Be Champions!™

I wish it were still on air for many reasons – not the least of which being Arsène Wenger, OBE (really) stepped down from his position at the football club which I thought as a small child had been named in his honour. My, how times have changed. Here is a heart-breaking article about the end of his tenure. I never had strong feelings on this one way or another, but I am lost for an answer as to what will fill my time now that looking for news about FC Arsenal / Wenger Out Protests popping up in strange places won’t be part of it.

Finally, Reinette brought this to my attention recently. I am in all likelihood the very last to know of its glorious existence, but even if you have seen it before, go watch this dog food commercial and scroll down (quickly now!) to the comments to tell me if you too think Ian Kahn might be in it. It. Sounds. Just. Like. Him. Or?

Anyway, on the off chance that too-long chapters that read like the kind of light-hearted melodrama (of which there stands a 2/3 chance your taxes have a hand in producing) are in fact your thing, I got you there, too. As always, I hope - Oh shit wait – I almost forgot. **This chapter contains MAJOR spoilers for *Hide and Seek***. There are other warnings, that is the main one. If you are one of those kids who, halfway through a book, flips to the last page and then never opens it again, click the return key now. If knowing the outcome of something increases your enjoyment (… we are all history fans, after all), then please, read on.
… although, it should be noted, I did tell you how Simcoe’s saga ends in the final scene of Ch.5. Cheeky, or?

Honesty? Family gatherings are like taking ill. You are expected to conform to the same standards of behaviour: swallow whatever you are served without question or complaint, try to sit still for the duration (lest your symptoms worsen) throw a fuss, however, by saying that you are happy to help – eventually accepting the restrictions of your role as invalid without too many theatries. Smile, when people look at you and hope that they don’t.<<

Or so Edmund Hewlett, or -more likely - his wife or one of the young women in her employ responded an hour after this sage advice would have been of any use.

Effie Gwillim stared at her phone with intent to weaponize it, to enter the kitchen and chuck it at the man laughing at her expense with two of the people whom she had come to Leicester with hopes to charm.

As to John,<< he continued, as though anticipating the scope of her problems, >>if you wish to get back at him, QPR play tomorrow. Why not take everyone to a local pub to watch the match and then ... simply wait. There will be no need to sink to his level. John will destroy himself, as we both know he is bound to in a certain environment. Despite a pretence of control, he can only contain his inner beast for so long when it comes to complaining about the management and/or linguistic failings of one Tony Fernandes. He will assuredly lash out, first at the subpar side he has supported since youth, then at whomever makes the error of trying to console or control him – whereby you can be ready with all the excuse you need to put him down like the mad dog that he is.<< Seconds later, Edmund or whomever he had typing in his stead, returned with >>Hope that helps.<<

Take him to battle letting him think he holds the higher ground and wait for him to implode???

Effie attempted to translate, having never taken much of an interest in sport despite (or rather in spite of) all the people in her life who were keen to invest their winter weekends standing in frozen stadiums with scarves lifted above their heads as they sang as opposed to wrapped snuggly around their necks as they shivered the way in which wider societal norms and survival instincts might instruct.

Precisely, my dear.<<

Effie nodded to herself. The noble-born astrophysicist had moments of truly living up to his infamous surname – mostly, to hear either John or Edmund speak of it, when forced into opposing his sometimes-friend. ‘Sometimes’ Effie had long since gathered, meant ‘every day but match day’ and Edmund (perhaps miffed that the ex-captain of the side he played for and coached was missing out on some weekend-do) seemed keen to make an arms-deal with whomever he felt he could count on to obliterate his (presently absent) internal competition. Effie found that she was glad for her best friend’s big brother and his shady but oddly self-assured ability to strategize. She was equally glad that the man now lived across the Atlantic, had no great interest in British politics and had not overlapped with her at school. When the mood struck, kind-hearted Edmund could prove positively terrifying.

But then John Graves Simcoe had a way in bringing out the worst in everyone by the simple reality of his person.

She took a deep breath which she was slow to release. From her hideaway behind the kitchen door,
Effie could hear John’s attempts to defend her honour through what seemed an endless series of indirect slights. This, she came to realise, was likely the same way in which he explained English life to the shabby Americans whom the chic, cosmopolitan and well-travelled editor supposed had never so much as left their own postcode. John was misrepresenting Britain’s best abroad and now at home with tired tropes told to and amongst the proletariat about the posh set, turned into something resembling a narrative by occasionally adding an antidote about boarding school, her beloved aunt or some other English celebrity saying something unseemly at a charity-do. This was all -apparently- to give the Nantabas ‘context’ for the girl his biological bother was dating. It gave Effie pause to question if the man she once loved ever knew her at all.

This was not the first time he had forged his words into a wrought iron weapon, or the first that she had found herself unexpectedly on the receiving end of his bayonet charge. Sometimes she had endured the onslaught, sometimes she had refused it outright. At school, John allowed social stress to transform him on occasion from the brooding poet whom she had so quickly fallen in love with into a bitter prick who managed to snide as he sulked. This had been true of him before any important sporting fixture, after injury, and before returning to the field – often before he had been given (or had given himself) appropriate time to heal. Effie thus had been relieved when he had been overlooked for captaincy in favour of Tarleton and had herself made the mistake of saying as much, thinking that with nothing to prove to the other players, John would invest more of himself in the love she often worried was on the wane. With these words they had broken up altogether. Later, she had quit the school play and thus ended another incarnation of her teenage love affair when her boyfriend, who had not wanted to go out for the thing in the first place and had taken pains to remind everyone of that fact, had been awarded the lead and, thinking that the casting was a mockery of his voice, had struggled to say the lines he had learned aloud. The two had additionally ended things between them a few times directly before an important exam or when he was particularly invested in a paper or project. Every time Effie took or had tried to win John back, she did so believing this time would be different.

Present circumstance tried her faith.

Effie wondered if a weekend with Percy’s family put her ex under the same perceived sense of stress that she would have found herself combating with or without his presence. Their problem was now as it was often; rather than treating her as an ally in the field, he saw her as an impending threat. John had spent a lifetime longing for a family and now sought the attention and affection denied to him by the tragedy of his youth. Effie wanted the same – both for herself and for the man she had loved when he had been a boy, but John, it appeared, had decided on his own that there was not enough of a spotlight for him to want to share its luminance with his fellow orphaned soul.

She looked again to Edmund’s advice on how to bring down their shared foe. Deciding she could not align her hopes of salvation with a sporting fixture she knew little about, she wondered if there might be a better, quicker method of making John confess to an ulterior motive – whatever his may ultimately be - quickly scrolling through her other messages. Mary Anne had sent her a post-sex selfie in which her lover was half-obscured by crumpled bedsheets with the caption ‘Get a hotel room, go see Mum + Dad on Easter only, bring slightly better wine than whatever else is being served.’ Charlotte seemed to echo this sentiment, texting the words ‘Wine and Xanax.’ followed half an hour later (without context) with ‘I’ll trade you mine for yours.’ Ellie, presumably at the same get-together, broke her week-long bout of silence (which Effie was now forced to now recognise for the ceasefire it had been) by inquiring, ‘Did you honestly just text me asking how to get on with ‘poor people’? Read your message back and tell me Percy’s family has the wrong idea of you.’ To add insult to injury, she had followed this with a few links to articles published by The Daily Mail regarding the appropriate use of Effie’s choice vocabulary as it pertained to statements and statistics given in relation to a recent census. It was pedantic and perfidious of her and Effie questioned what else she had expected from the former princess when she had sent the text during tea in her earlier
Given that the links she had received opened directly to the website, Effie could tell that her best friend had deleted the Mail Online App, causing her to additionally question how anyone would be so vain as to think themselves above free and easy access and alerts to news, gossip and daily dirt. A string of gendered expletives filled Effie’s mind when she imagined her friend with a smug smile, having tea with a kindly mother-in-law who was in the process of relaying the same praise The Guardian had bestowed upon whatever the wife of Mr Brexit thought she had any right saying to a room full of pro-globalization capitalists at Davos.

Saddened by the stark differences she imagined their present circumstances to be, Effie quickly closed WhatsApp and considered crying to her literal agony aunt. She had gotten so far as to open the Margaret Spinkels app before realising that anything she spoke or heard in response would give her position away. She continued to listen to the laughter through the door, fighting the urge to both scream and weep over the apparent ease in which the most awkward man she had ever encountered had established familiarity until she heard her phone buzzed with an incoming call. Effie answered accidently in an attempt to silence it.

“I can’t -” she whispered, bringing the device to her ear.

“What the actual fuck do you think your doing, texting my fifteen-year-old for relationship advice? Don’t you think she has enough to contend with without your incessant complaining?” the man on the other end of the line demanded, loud enough for the entire house to hear.

“You know Mr. Ferguson?”

“Is that rhetorical?” Marie smarted. She sat with her dad on a bench of what had been a public rest station before austerity had changed the toilets shut and removed the rubbish bins, leaving the roadside a wasteland barren but for litter, leaves that had fallen months before and piles of snow that refused to melt. The late afternoon air was cool enough that she had her legs tucked up to her chest to conserve the warmth which her father-figure contributed to by lending her his scarf and wrapping her shoulders tightly within his arm. The teen had cried about her mum and all the other things she feared she would too-soon be forced to miss until her sorrow gave way to shame and she attempted to excuse her behaviour by voicing the same assurances experience instructed were always suitable – ‘It is fine though.’ and ‘I guess it is not really a big deal.’

This had been all the excuse Ellie needed to take her leave. Marie watched her step-mother of sorts pace along the treeline as she waited on Mou and Pep to sniff out a spot suitable for their faeces, wondering if the woman she had idolized since she was seven and had switched from foil to sabre secretly hoped that her favourite student would be sent away in accordance to what seemed her mother’s wishes. Then, Maire reasoned, Ellie would be free of the sort of daily obligations that served as a hinderance to starting a family of her own. While Marie wished she had more siblings, she wondered if these hypotheticals would even count if Ban was not her dad anymore and this she asked aloud.

“What?” Ban’s features twisted from surprise to concern. “Where is this coming from? Firstly, Ellie doesn’t want to have children -”

“But you do.”
“Well, sure but -”

“Then why did you marry her?” Marie demanded.

“Kiddo … I love Ellie, and sometimes love means accepting that there are certain things you and your partner don’t – and likely won’t – see eye to eye on. Ells and I are both at critical stages in our careers that require us both to travel often, and with a baby she wouldn’t … anyway,” he shifted, squeezing her slightly, “I already have two perfect daughters -”

“I don’t think she wants me around either. Maybe she is okay with Georgie because she lives with her mum up in Scotland and maybe she would like me better, too, were I in Wales. Is that why you bring up Mr. Ferguson? Because he is kind of Georgie’s dad-during-the-week even though he and Kolina aren’t together?”

Ban Tarleton looked pained. Marie could not tell if she had hurt him with the insinuation that her little sister had something of a surrogate father or that Ellie hoped the same would happen to her with Thomas Robinson. Either way, it took him a while to answer and Marie, determined not to cry any more, began imagining the layouts of her friends’ homes, mapping out whose cupboard she could hide in so that she could continue to attend her school in London if worst came to worst and the family she had grown up with no longer wanted her around. Her cousin Billy was out of the question. She and Susan were in a fight. Rachel talked too much and Arthur was simply not that hospitable. She sniffed and tilted her head towards the heavens, hoping the tears pooling in her eyes would not fall if she could provide a flat enough surface in which to confine them. Seeing this, her dad spoke.

“No, I … the thing is, Ellie has been preparing a law – or, should it come to it – countersuit for months so that in any event, she and I can retain custody of you until you come of age. She and Mary Anne meet practically every day on their lunch hours playing devil’s advocate with all of the evidence that might be brought up in cross litigation concerning my ability to parent. Kiddo,” he swallowed, “I did some truly terrible things in service to Crown and country – things I’ve done my best to shield you from but which may come up if Thomas hires himself a halfway decent solicitor. I bring Fergs up because … I don’t know. I should have started another way.

“Listen, I swore I would do my upmost not to, but I’m not perfect, I’m just not, and in the future, I may well slip up and say something insulting about your mother’s husband in front of you. Should you someday want a relationship with him, which frankly I hope you do – for he can tell you things about your mum that fail my own experiences with her - oh Kiddo, what I am trying to say is that Ells and I both love you more than anything and are doing our best to protect you while presenting a positive picture of your mum and the man -”

“Why bother?” Marie spat. “He never cared that I even existed until just recently! Which means he doesn’t care about me at all, he is just trying to get his hands on Mum’s wealth by whatever means he thinks he can. I don’t want to know him. Why should I? He never wanted to know me!”

“He does now,” he dad said simply.

“It is bullocks.”

“Language, miss!”

“God, you’re such a fahhh – such a hypocrite,” she muttered. Ban nodded.

“The thing is, I’m not sure how to put this or if I should even be saying anything at all. I brought Fergs up because I happen to think he is a good dad to Sean and Patrick.”
“And?” Marie sneered.

“Well,” Ban bit his lip, “he wasn’t always. For a few years after, and I suppose also before he and his wife divorced, he let problems in his professional life damage the relationship he had with his boys. It was never that he did not love them above all else, but sometimes, for some people, priorities can become obscured by the immediate. I actually had it out with him over this, after he pulled all of his resources to help find you when you ran away. I was … such a fucking wreck from the experience, there were a number of factors keeping me in America which it makes no sense to get into now, but all the reasons I had to remain abroad on that diplomatic mission ceased to matter when you went missing. Even after you were found, after we two got off the phone together, I was crying, probably harder that I ever otherwise have in my life -”

“Even when you lost your hand?” Marie asked. Her dad was naturally given to hyperbole. She suddenly felt he ought to admit as much.

“Oh. Far, far worse. A hand I can live without,” he smiled. Though she knew it had not been intended as such, the statement felt like a slap.

“I’m sorry.”

Ban shook his head. “It was a wake up. I demanded that Cornwallis let me go immediately, he thusly arranged grounds for my dismissal and the flight I took to meet up with you and your mum in Edinburgh saw me effectively dishonourably discharged from service. Fergs well, in expressing what was at the time the kindest sentiment he had ever afforded me, explained the situation he was in with his own kids. Don’t repeat this, okay?”

“I promise,” Marie joined her pinkie finger to her father’s scar tissue.

“About a decade before, he had lost a great deal of money through no real fault of his own, his father’s death happening to coincide with the divorce. The Ferguson family estate had been seized by the bank, he had been unjustly reduced in rank by the police force and as such found himself working extra hours to make up the difference decide in the child support agreement when the figure would not have posed a problem. Wanting to provide for his boys led him into some unfortunate circles of acquaintance. I know he used hard drugs on occasion and his relationship with his ex and thus his children was disintegrating. None of this is to say he did not love them, and I don’t mean to in any way discount his sins, but he has certainly atoned for them since.”

“Wow. I really had no idea.”

“My point is, at least give Thomas the chance to do the same. You don’t know what he has been through – nor do I, but your mother is easily the savviest woman I have ever in my life known and if she believes it to be in your best interest to at least meet the man, don’t you agree that you owe him that much? I know that Sean and Patrick are richer for having their dad back in their lives and although it is strange -having seen him as an enemy in so many areas for so long - I’m happy that Georgie and Kolina live with Fergs and his mum now.”

Marie’s eyes widened.

He father continued quickly, “Please don’t take that last statement to imply I would ever let you leave our house in London so close to taking your A-levels, but someday, should you want to know the man your mother loved enough to marry, I don’t want to do or say anything to make that more difficult for you despite the problems that exist between him and myself. You never know what the future might bring. I love you, Kiddo – I know I am messing this up somehow but I just want to do what is right. And so does Ellie. But you are correct in your criticism and complaint. We ought both
not be so distant, and for that I am truly sorry. I’ll talk to her, and we’ll talk to you … we’ll do better.”

“I’m sorry,” Marie echoed, “I don’t know why I’m crying, I just -”

“Hey, hey … there is no need to apologise. Marie, I know despite everyone’s best efforts your life has been unconventional, and sometimes it can feel like it is all too much, but you have so many people in your life who love you so, so much and you should feel free to talk or cry or scream or laugh with any of us. We are here for you no matter what. So c’mon, yea? Let’s get back on the road that we have ample time for a diving lesson on Aunt Emmie and Aunt Izzie’s private land where we can’t get in trouble for it before supper is served. What do you say?” he winked.

Marie answered by standing and giving her dad a big hug when he rose seconds later. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket a few times more, the dogs barked excitedly when they saw her approach, and Ellie, smiling mischievously, handed over the leashes to her that she might forge a weapon from that which the blizzard had left behind. By the time Ban recovered from the surprise of the snowball enough to try to retaliate, Ellie had a small arsenal at the ready, telling a laughing Marie not to pity him, he could hardly defend himself in this arena when he had use of both his hands, and this, she winked, for all the effort he put into poking fun at people from the highlands for whom snowstorms were a rule rather than an exception.

Her dad repeated his wife’s words in a poorly rendered imitation of her Scottish accent and for a few minutes the world seemed as perfect and pristine as it had a few weeks earlier when she had woken up to a late white winter and, with it, the news that school had been cancelled – letting her spend the day in the company of her mates as opposed to Madame Bovary, cacao rather than pre-calc, waging wars in the otherwise empty streets rather than simply reading about the barricades erected all over continental Europe in 1848 until such time that she and her friends were all so soaked they had all forgotten who had been on whose side to begin with.

For a while, the world spun without worry as she watched the grown-ups share the same fun.

For a while, it seemed to Marie that the things that were good in her life would somehow find a way of existing for her forever until her dad, drenched and perhaps a bit shamed by his surrender, discovered that the car would not start. After expressing his frustrations in the sorts of words which Maire was not herself allowed to use, he asked for his phone back that he might ring an automotive club in the “likely” event his wife and her brother (“the rocket scientist,” he said with a distain that made Marie wonder if the tone owed itself to the in-law or the situation they were in) were unable to identify and fix the problem via the video chat Ellie was by then engaged in.

Marie was hesitant to hand over the device. Her aunts and uncles, deep into a competition they had clearly let get the better of them, kept texting her, or rather, her father (as she had not changed out the SIM card as she swore she had done at his request) ways in which a Card Against Humanity with his name on printed on it had been played. These increasingly lewd and insulting ad-libs were not, however, what caused the man to further to succumb to his worst tendencies. No. Ban Tarleton was livid that Effie Gwillim had sought out her advice in dealing with the Simcoe situation which the poor woman found herself in.

Marie bit her bottom lip. This was sure to be brutal.
“Are you having a go at me?” Dembe Nantaba laughed. “Ban Tarleton can’t get the RAC out to jump his car? You are telling us that Bloody Ban who -lest we forget - married himself to a Hewlett without waiting on the instrument of consent which the queen refused to give after the fact, who then turned on the monarchy entirely by funding a parliamentary run on whatever pay-out ex—Lady Eleanor got from being officially and publicly disowned by her family – and this after narrowly losing a seat on city council! – who just slid himself into real power and influence in the biggest ‘fuck off’ ever in the whole of history and within two years is running England in all but name - you have to go help him?

“The arrogant idiot is somehow important enough that he can get the Pope to tweet at his sister-in-law – is Lady Anna technically his sister in law? – and despite all that he has done to destroy the aristocracy by proxy, Queen Liz is apparently asking for his wife’s consultation again on her carbon reduction initiative and Tattler is reporting that he will be a groomsman in Prince Harry’s wedding. But you, Percy, are telling us, that this guy, who can get happily away with anything from ruining our foreign relations to wearing those awful hats to members-only posh places, can’t get the fucking RAC out to jump his car? I’m calling bullocks on that one. Bitch could probably get Wills to fly his Gran out to wherever they are stuck and have the sovereign herself fix the sedan the apparently ran over Benedict Arnold. Mad shit, that. Why should you have to go?” she demanded. “You are meant to be on holiday, to put it otherwise, as far away from those people as humanly possible.”

“I don’t have to go, I offered to,” Percy told his cousin sharply.

“No,” his mother countered in the pettiest of ways, “Effie asked you to.”

“Why on earth wouldn’t she? None of you have been anything but rude to her since we arrived, and frankly – while I’ll give to you that my girlfriend is far too much of a lady to call you out on it – I’ve had about as much as I can take.” He had watched her grown increasingly uncomfortable at tea, suffering in silence while his mother seemed to go out of her way to snub her, John making unkind comments about the conduct of his fellow guest all the while.

It had been weeks since he had spoken to his biological brother and Percy privately vowed that when the weekend was through, he would cease all communication with the man for good. His mother had been right, seeking out answers had been a mistake from the start. He could have just as easily continued filling the emotional void that came with finding out he had been adopted with copious amounts of over-seasoned food as he had sought to placate every other pain of his past (including – in a cruelly ironic way – the way the kids at school came up with to inform him of the problems they found with his physique.) Enough time had passed since their first encounter that it no longer hurt that John did not seem to like him very much. It hurt quite a bit, however, that despite his stated mistrust of Percy’s motives for originally wanting to meet him, he found it appropriate to communicate with his parents, to fly over for Easter and to insult the woman Percy loved, encouraging others to do the same.

Effie Gwillim was the best thing to have come out of an endeavour that had consumed nearly half of Percy’s life. He had wanted to know where he came from in order to better know himself but had instead found that she was in herself all the answer and reason he had ever needed. At present, her place beside him was all that was keeping him from turning his brother’s face into something resembling the ground-meat-mixture awaiting his mother’s attention on the kitchen counter.

“Percy, please,” Effie murmured. “It is okay, I can call him back and explain.”

“No, we are leaving,” he asserted in a hard tone not directed at her. “Mum, Dembe, you forget, these people aren’t just my employers, they are my friends, and if I am in a position to help, I certainly will. You raised me that way. Hopefully when I return in an hour or so you’ll have had time to remember
the manners you took pains to instil and conduct yourselves accordingly. Maybe pass some of them on to your new son in the process.”

“I’d bet my salary that the reason they can’t get the car to start owes itself to pure arrogance,” John smirked, proving his point. Percy narrowed his gaze as his brother pondered his bosses’ predicament in a pitch that made him sound like a child spoilt to boredom who had just discovered helium in birthday-balloons and sought to amuse himself through the act of speaking. “Ellie - who still can’t be bothered to get a licence and knows next to nothing about automobiles, likely insisted on leaving the engine running when they pulled into a rest area that the car would stay warm and Ban was too stupid to stop her -”

“John, I don’t know what your problem is,” Percy interrupted, “but whatever faults you may find with the society you seem to rejoice in shunning, I’m not having it. I’m done. You have been rude to and about the woman I love, and I am sorry if you are having trouble accepting the reality of our relationship but that hardly justifies the onslaught of insults you seem to think you can disguise as witty banter.”

“Love?” Simcoe gaped as though he had never heard the word.

“Effie, come. Let’s go do a good deed.”

“Percy you have been home for half a day, your brother is visiting from America, I’m about to get dinner on,” his mother protested.

“By all means. I’ll share your table but not in the illusion that you have gone out of your way to make this feel like a home, or that John is my brother for that matter. By the way, my bosses, who send you and dad anniversary cards and birthday and Christmas gifts, mind, aren’t half as bad as the papers you read make them out to be, you should really know as much from your experience of them. To that end, you might be better served by The Daily Mail than some outlet getting its information from secondary sources. Really Dembe?” he shifted, “Insulting the largest English-language newspaper in the world while listening to two American collage students with backgrounds in neither politics nor journalism talk about whether or not David Hasselhoff was responsible for the Reunification of Germany from a studio in the backroom of a dive bar?”

“It is satire,” his cousin said sheepishly.

“Actually, the two share the apartment upstairs and I believe record the show there,” Simcoe informed them, presuming trying to justify his relevance once more.

“Well it all comes down to location then, doesn’t it,” Percy spat. “Effie has more than doubled the readership in what I am otherwise told is a dying industry during her tenure. Think about that before saying or insinuating anything else with the objective of diminishing her talents and accomplishments. That goes for all of you. I’ll be back in an hour. If you haven’t learned to behave by the time I am back I’ll be gone for good,” he promised.

“How can you talk to your mother like that?” John demanded in a tone that still bordered mockery, having followed them both outside to Percy’s truck.

“How can you talk about your friends like you do? About Effie, about her family?” the younger brother retorted. “What - because they are famous that automatically reduces them to fodder? How
would you like it if people spoke to and about you the way they occasionally do in the papers?”

“I’m sure they do,” John smirked.

“I’m sure – in your case – they have reason to.”

“Would the both of you stop?!” Effie demanded. John apologised, but only to her, and only in the airiest of fashion. Percy turned to open the passenger-side door for his girlfriend.

“What are you doing?” Effie asked as John forced his way into the car ahead of her, buckling himself into the middle seat to create a psychical barrier between them.

“Coming with you,” Simcoe smiled, chirping, “It has been a while since I’ve had a holiday in Britain and longer still since I’ve had a change to catch up proper with my old friend Banastre Tarleton,” he spoke the name and its modifier as menacingly as he possibly could within his limited natural range, continuing airily, “who must have somehow transformed into quite a fabulous fellow, what with your texting him over tea, him then ringing up to remind us all by example of that tragic era of English football where the most entertaining thing about watching the nation side was watching Wayne Rooney get carded for cursing out a ref. … and my – well, we are not brothers, are we Percy?” he sneered before returning his attentions to Effie, “Your boyfriend, we’ll say, taking the side of this man who said much meaner things than were even suggested in the kitchen in much cruder language until you offered your help in getting his car to restart just to get him to stop. Must really be quite a fellow indeed. Perhaps I ought to offer him my services too. To hear Dembe tell it, I have some familiarity with the vehicle, after all.”

John Graves Simcoe felt overdressed in most situations and meeting the Tarletons at what had once been a rest area was no exception. His pristine tailored suit was met by Marie’s typical teenage attire, ripped jeans and a pullover printed with the name of a store he had seen often enough on girls in her age group to suppose it was ‘in’. Ellie, too, was dressed down, which felt off-putting – women like her did not wear their hair in messy braids or wear leggings for any activity beside meeting with their personal trainer or for that matter, oversized sweaters at all. He greeted them both with a nod they failed to acknowledge, instead greeting Percy with hugs and Effie with kisses on both cheeks.

John stood back, observing what his life might have been. Percy was taller than him and rather fat by comparison, he dressed for tea the way John only would after work when he had no social engagement to otherwise dictate his clothing selection, but despite these differences, the two looked similar enough that John could easily picture himself in his brother’s place. The problem, as he saw it, was that Percy could likewise imagine himself as Effie’s white knight as well.

“Trouble in paradise, I take it?” Ban Tarleton remarked in lieu of a greeting. John turned to find himself faced with the rear end of a chicken that looked in the process of pecking its way through something his old school mate would name as a hat. Looking down to meet the man’s eyes, he determined that this unholy union of taxidermy and millinery was all that was keeping his friend from freezing -Ban’s fitted jacket not standing up to the evening chill.

“What makes you say that?” he responded, doing his utmost to seem unamused when in truth he was struggling against the impulse to laugh outright. This felt the sort of thing Edmund ought to have warned him about when bringing him to the airport, but then, he supposed, he had not anticipated seeing Ban at any point on his five-day visit, and even if he had, there would have been no real need
remind him that since leaving the armed forces, the former colonel had returned to dressing the way he had as a teenager prior to enlistment – novelty headgear left better unbought at continental Christmas markets and all. John felt himself losing as his lips hazarded into an insulting smirk. Edmund had warned him about the weather forecast and told him that since they had last been to Britain, KFC had stopped selling mash, which had turned out to be true and proved enough anguish upon reflection to enable John to look upon absurdity with a straight face.

Tarleton, he noticed, had narrowed his gaze into a glare, even having been spared the mockery his novelty helmet so richly deserved. He ought not to have contained himself.

“What makes you return to England, show up at Percy’s parent’s place just to be a tit to Effie?” Ban demanded as though to imply that his track record in dining amongst those who deserved to die was in any way ‘better.’ John was not being a ‘tit’. Percy was using the woman he had once loved and still very much considered a friend and therefore had to be done away with. He had no intended to hurt Effie, only to make her see that she did not belong in his world, that Percy was likely using her to climb the social ladder the way he had used Ellie and had attempted to use him.

“Rich coming from you,” he snorted.

“I really don’t think I need defend anything to which you might think to allude,” Ban returned, careful not to drop his gaze. Even knowing he could easily take him in combat, John reached to his hearing aid, tapping it in hopes of helping against the ringing he heard in and after the voice Tarleton used when reminding one that he had very much committed war atrocities and had, as a civilian, not only gotten away with but been awarded for a seemingly perfect murder. Satisfied that his foe was either intimidated or appalled, Ban took a side step and continued his task of keeping a pair of dumb animals occupied.

“You bought another dog,” John commented.

“Pep. He’s ‘peppy’, according to my daughter,” Ban answered, “A peppy puppy.”

“You know what you did.”

Ban nodded, “Somehow it annoys me.”

“That you and your daughter share a sense of humour?”

“Yea, yea – on that, what is the point of this trip John? You have a beautiful girlfriend, three adorable little girls of your own, plus a stepson who – according to the father anyway – worships the very ground you walk on. Why try to deny your ex the potential of finding a happy family, too?”

“Because it is my family – she, Christ Ban, you don’t see it? This is just Effie trying to recreate what we lost out of spite or sorrow or some other emotional impulse on which love can’t be built and Percy encouraging it because he is after her wealth.”

“And you’ve determined this how exactly?” Ban squinted.

“Observation. Experience.”

“What fucking ‘experience’ do you have to speak of? You mean Anna and Edmund? Oh, Jesus Fucking Aych! After everything that happened between them, I really don’t think for a moment-”

“Maybe I mean you and Ellie,” John suggested. “Strange how that one worked itself out, ‘innit?”

“If you are suggesting I married for money, our prenup stipulates that I’ll see nothing should we
separate and my allowance of five-hundred-pounds per week - nothing in London, mind - is only to be paid if I attend GA meetings twice weekly, something a sponsor of her choosing has to stipulate to payroll.”

“And yet you don’t take a salary.”

“I think our tax payers’ money can be put to better use,” he seemed to threaten though he spoke buoyantly. “Granted I make a decent living with appearances on various political talk shows and news programmes, enough to afford food, housing and weekly flights for either myself or my daughter Georgie, who’s mum had primary custody, but at the end of most months I hazard to imagine that my wife’s body guard earns better than I myself do.”

“How much?” John asked.

“Does it matter?” Ban returned. “I didn’t wed for an access to wealth, the fact that you would even suggest as much shows just how splendid your skills at character assessment can prove. I see both parties in either a personal or professional capacity nearly every day of the week. Effie and Percy are a couple because they want to be, and there is nothing ‘spiteful’ or ‘sorrowful’ about it. It has nothing to do with money and nothing to do with you. When are you going to get over yourself?”

“When Percy first started working for Ellie,” John countered, “he went so far as to admit when asked directly that he had done so with the hopes of finding himself in my company.”

“And having met you, it is my understanding that the two of you have hardly spoken since. Why do you think that might be?”

“He met Effie first, set his sights on the bigger prize,” John replied simply.

“Is that how you saw her back at school?”

“Of course not!”

“Of course not,” Ban repeated. “She is an amazing woman. Why then is it unthinkable that someone else should view her the way you did … or do? I don’t know, John, if you ‘love’ her at all or if you ever did, you’ll stop whatever it is you are doing that has her so upset that she is turning to my little girl for help,” he spat. After watching the dogs bite at each other for moment he added with a smile, “I think that she thinks she is clever in that respect, Marie I mean. That I don’t know about this lad from school who over the course of the past year she has gone from making fun of incessantly to inviting to practically everything. Came home not that long ago with a love-bite she tried to pass off as a bruise from fencing.”

“Without a mask then?”

“Exactly what I asked at the time. She said she was just hot in the studio and I let it go. Effie is the same way though, not that long ago either, she tried to sneak out of my house in the morning and then, when the dogs found her out,” he gestured to the animals, “pretended that she had just let herself in to interview me about something fully banal. Really begs the question if she just takes all of her tips from teens or hasn’t been in love since she herself was one.”

“Or if profession has made secret-keeping impossible,” John suggested as an alternative, hating the idea that had been forced upon him that Effie’s life since he left had been as lonely as he himself remembered much of childhood being.

“You … realise your point proves mine?”
Simcoe shifted, asking after a moment, “What you said earlier about me and Thomas … what are you doing talking to Abe Woodhull?”

“Why wouldn’t I talk to Abe Woodhull?” Ban gaped, genuinely confused by the question. “Discounting politics, we have everything in common. Collage dropouts, dealing with death in self-destructive ways, powerful, influential fathers of whose favour we were never quite worthy, loyal to our friends, family and respective fatherlands to a point where these things come for us in what others might consider great cost … I love Abe, frankly I don’t understand why you don’t – he is a sarcastic little shite just like you. Plus, you are family, in a way,” he smiled. “Or did something happen? I only really ring him to talk about work, or to ask him about the Times Crossword under the pretence of needing to speak to the Secretary. Still, your name comes up every now and again – hey, next time it does, I might think mention to him that you seem to have the same distain he does for the very idea of the person you thought you would spend your life with as a bloody teenager finding happiness with someone new, even ages after things ended between you both – that is, at least emotionally. Maybe it would help convince him to make more of an effort to get on with your sorry ass.”

“Things are as fine as the possibly could be between Mr Woodhull and myself. He got both Christmas and Easter this year. He has no grounds on which to complain,” John sneered.

“Oh? You and Mrs Woodhull then …?”

“Mary is in DC doing paralegal work for Jordan and Ben, the kids are all with her and I believe the plan is officially for everyone to go to Abraham and Joseph’s after church on Easter; the real plan of course being for my girlfriend to send Thomas and Jeanne to hear whatever service with Ben and his significant other – whom I also can’t stand, mind – whilst my girlfriend slaves away in the kitchen to spare everyone an Easter made entirely of those cold, hardboiled eggs they paint with water and vinegar for the sole purpose of stinking up the house for days. I miss her and the kids,” he acknowledged, “though I’ll not miss that particular family tradition.”

“I still can’t believe you named your eldest after yourself, mate,” Ban snickered.

“Banina,” John returned flatly.

“Jeanne Graves though – bit much.”

“Her name was Woodhull on her birth certificate, even though the parentage was not contested and Mary and Abraham were separated at the time, I had to go through the legal process of adopting my own daughter and I though things ought to be made clear in the interim.”

“But Mary has been divorced for … how long now? No plans to …?”

“Naturally I have plans … it is only,” he stopped. Even if he could find words for what he felt, he would have been loath to share them with Ban Tarleton or anyone sharing in his effortless arrogance.

“You don’t think she would accept?”

“I … it is complicated. We will leave it there.” John pulled a pack of fags from his pocket.

“No,” Ban said when he was offered one. “Never have. Don’t entirely see why you do, what with it being so easy to free yourself of frustration by firing off a few rounds wheresoever you please.”

“I live in the same building as Edmund Hewlett,” John replied of his habit after taking a long drag.

“Still – my point.”
“I’ll give you that,” he smiled.

“But you still live with Mary right, I mean, when she is not away for work?”

“Yes.”

“I mean … she’ll say yes,” Ban informed him as though he had the right. “Having met her all of once, I feel fully comfortable in my assessment that she is likely livid you’ve not asked already.”

“How can you be certain? How can you always be so certain of everything? How did you and Ellie…”

“Me and Ellie? You were there when I asked. You were at the bloody wedding, not that you had any real choice in the matter -”

“How did you know she would say yes though?” John asked, more pleadingly than he had anticipated.

“I didn’t,” Ban laughed. “And to be honest I hadn’t even planned it which is why I didn’t take a knee until she told me to. After the funeral though, I - well I found her in her bedroom chamber at the palace and went in to try and say goodbye. She was teary, saying she hadn’t the closure she had always expected to feel and asked if I would hold her until she went to sleep – it was not sexual, no, nothing like that, but she was always so strange about being touched that I … I knew she loved me and I knew she had found peace even if she had yet to realise it. I ended up staying until morning light and left never intending that we two should again meet in this lifetime.

“A month or two passed and I was up in Edinburgh on a Friday night, meaning to take Georgie to see Disney on Ice the next day when Kolina mentioned that she was surprised she had not heard anything from Ells or Fergs yet, wondering if I had, then explaining when it became clear that I had no idea what she was on about that the two had struck some kind of plea agreement. Leaving her with the dishes, I got myself to the station as quickly as I could and just waited, planning to confess to everything in order to prevent – it is not important. A few minutes after uniform brought you idiots in for processing, Ells came out of interrogation – all smiles – and finding that I had no reason to otherwise explain my being there - I improvised a proposal, to which she initially said no, informing me that since she would likely not be a member of the aristocracy for much longer I was to endlessly acknowledge her as my better by taking a knee. I couldn’t even get though her entire name and title before she said yes and then had Ferguson ring Mary Anne to have her fax over the prenup she and Clayton had written up for us as soon as Ellie had recovered from the shock of my having asked her in the first place. The first time. When she was nineteen and I was twenty. Bitch had it planned! Planned all along and she took me completely by surprise,” he exclaimed as though he still felt the same rush of excitement. “And then Mary Anne came of course with cut flowers and flat-iced cake form Tesco after her secretary had given her the news. I was so busy skimming her magnum opus of a prenup that I had no time to write my vows - what with the police chief, the only person on the premises with the legal right to marry us insisting that we wrap things up before seven. But Ells – she had this planned so precisely in her mind that she even snuck ‘you’ll never walk alone’ into all those promises one makes at the alter just to fuck with me further. Unbelievable,” Ban smiled, shaking his head. “Point is though, even had I not been blind-sighted by the whole thing, I’d have had nothing to do with the engagement or the wedding. That is on women. Yours is probably planned, too. It probably has been since before Jeanne was born, before the divorce and before Abe had so much as agree to grant her one.”

John nodded, knowing the boy he had boarded with for seven years was probably right about Mary’s wants and expectations. Resenting him his confidence and happiness, he responded, “You might have gotten better concessions in the post nuptial agreement though. Isn’t Clayton, I mean, I
know he read Jurisprudence at Oxford, but his actual job at Inter is ensuring that his signings cost the club as little as possible, shouldn’t you have asked .”

“Oy, it is worse now that he’s been made Assistant Sporting Director – practically a modern slave trade,” Ban replied airily. “But I’d have been fucked in ink by Mary Anne Burges regardless of my legal representation – and so will you. I know Effie put her and your Mary in contact and she sorted the divorce.”

“Effie did that?” John asked, looking over at the woman he had loved and lost, not believing that for all the pain he had caused her she had taken it upon herself to create the circumstances that would allow Mary to be the bride she herself had never gotten to be.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Ban asked, again confused by the sentiment. “She loves you. This thing, with her and Percy, let it alone, yea?”

“I’m still worried that she will get hurt.”

“I’m worried that you will if you keep things up,” Ban seemed to taunt.

“You are not serious,” John snorted.

“We’ve established on more than one occasion, you and I, or, just you rather, that physical confrontations between us two then to be rather one sided. Still,” he smiled. “I think you know what Ells does for a living and how little encouragement she needs to act when someone she loves is being threatened. Leave Percy and Effie alone, o’rite?”

“There is the devil I know.”

“Oh John, you have no idea.”

“Hey,” Effie greeted. Marie gave her a hug, Ellie acknowledged her presence with a small kiss and a slight nod before thanking Percy for coming out and handing him the tablet she was using to conference with her elder brother, who uncomfortably affirmed the problem that Percy and John had between them been able to decipher without having had to look at the vehicle.

“Do you want to help me out, Marie?” Percy asked. The teen nodded. He showed her how to connect the cables and told her to hop into his truck. In park, she was meant to hit the gas pedal when he gave the go ahead, an idea Marie seemed to think of as being ‘wicked fun’ – asking Ellie to first take a picture of her behind the wheel of Percy’s truck from her phone, which she assessed had a better camera than the Blackberry she was borrowing.

Ellie had to take the picture three times before her step-daughter was satisfied with her appearance, embarrassed of her braces, spots, and the way her hair looked when she wore it down. Percy made some minor adjustments to the way the teen had connected the cables and then proceeded to wait. ‘You should hear her trying to get ready in the morning,’ he mouthed. Effie was not one to judge. She had been worse at Marie’s age and likely still was now that she had no one around to listen to her tally up her physical flaws each day. She gave him a small smile and a shrug, wondering as she turned back to Marie what she and her friends would have been like had they grown up in an age where the cultural norm was to photograph and share every small experience as though it were worthy of a cover story.
Effie herself took few selfies, and not just for the reasons that made it a struggle for her to think of herself as being particularly attractive. She never thought to tweet her food before eating it and had rarely posted anything of her private life to the internet, being in a profession where she found more ease in talking about others.

Ellie had not been allowed to use social media under her old last name and still remained deeply reclusive online under the extended freedoms that came with the loss of rank and hereditary title.

John, who Effie still stalked sometimes on Facebook, seemed to use his social media space sparingly, occasionally commenting on an article he shared in words she did not know over topics she had to do a bit of independent research on to fully understand the scope. Sometimes, he would post a poem, a picture of the kids he coached or the one’s his girlfriend had been able to give him, but these were increasingly rare. Effie questioned if this owed itself to Facebook’s security problems or if John was having problems in his relationship and was thus trying to find or create problems in hers. It could, however, just be a symptom of age and environment. They had grown up in relative isolation, where boarders knew everything about everyone else at school. The internet was a sorry imitation for that kind of intimacy.

“You can’t post this,” Ellie told her step-daughter when at last she seemed satisfied. “Not until we get to Emma’s, I don’t want to risk compromising our security. Not when we are traveling without a staff.”

“I know,” Marie rolled her eyes. Effie considered the absurdity of that exchange and what is implied. The Tarletons were on holiday form the stress of the City, and in an attempt to mirror some aspect of the ‘real’ world for Marie’s sake, they had to rob her of other generation-specific cultural standards. Effie thought back to her experiences at the Nantabas’, wondering if some version of this might serve to save her. Percy never seemed uncomfortable in her circles, but then when he was not working, it was not as though the people he was around did not know who he was. Effie found that she never stepped out of the office. She should put her phone away for the weekend, tell stories without naming any of the characters in them and do more listening than talking, asking polite rather than prying questions and – it all just seemed so hard.

“How do you do it?” she asked Ellie who had walked over to her when her presence was no longer needed.

“What precisely?”

“How do you always find a way to get on with people?”

“It has nothing to do with me,” the princess replied with her practiced nonchalance. “Listen Effie, ninety percent of the reasons people will come to hate you or love you have nothing to do with you. Your window of influence with any audience is limited, it is hard to accept in this age of individualism, but society has not fundamentally changed since the concept of self-expression became a societal aspiration. Do you remember that article your aunt published about me in which I stated that I had no desire to reassume the title of ‘Lady’ – which is far too encompassing as it is – now that it is within my right to do so, not wanting my address to owe itself to the accomplishments of some man when I’ve my own to speak of? I got so many letters after that, essentially praising my embodiment of an ideal that the cultural moment we are in has dictated worthwhile – ‘hashtag-me-too’ without needing to resort to self-victimization.

“I find often when explaining my impartiality to praise, it comes across to some as being ‘humble’ – which is a ‘good’ thing because the Bible says as much, to others I am ‘aloof’ – which is ‘bad’ because that is a symptom of snobbery. It is the same way for everyone in nearly every interpersonal reaction,” she paused. “Try to live, maybe for the moments where you take yourself by surprise,”
Ellie smiled, shifting her gaze between Effie and Percy, “And don’t give any mind to what others have to say about you, they don’t realise, but they are instead only talking about themselves. It is useful, of course, for topics of political machinations, but not as a means of assessing your own worth.”

“How did the crowned heads of Europe ever fall?” Effie whispered in wonder.

“Poor logistics, mostly.” Ellie glanced in the direction of John and Ban, forcing Effie to do the same. “If you think him to have some tactical advantage in the field, focus on keeping your army fed.”

“You want to know what the crazy thing is?” Effie had to laugh. “I was talking to Edmund this morning and when he tried to tell me something about QPR I instinctively translated it into Hewlett-speak … and I’m sorry, I don’t mean to laugh it is just, God what is the world going to do fifty, sixty years from now when none of you are left to keep it in check?”

“There will always be families like me,” Ellie answered. Effie was not sure if this was intended to be an assurance or a threat, or if it even made a difference given the source.

“Ellie, are things alright between us?” she asked as the evening air threatened to chill the silence between them. “I know it was wrong of me to go to Marie for … dating advice of all things, but in my defence, I was originally only hoping to talk to Ban about -”

“Why? Of all the things you could name to be sorry over …” Ellie interrupted, slightly annoyed. “I personally would seek her council on a great many things above his. She has a better grip on a lot of things than I fear I, or most of us for that matter, ever will,” she sighed. “You know that her mother took her A-levels when she was fourteen? Fourteen! We think we had it bad but poor Mary never had a life. Her mother cum manager pressed her so hard when she was a teenager that by the time she was seventeen we -and every other girl in Europe- owned at least one of her albums. She was completely burnt out by nineteen, had wanted to drop music entirely and attend university, the record company would not let her out of contract, she married a young lawyer who said he could sort it and a few months later found herself pregnant and millions in debt, owing the label a third album and world tour, the subject of constant public scrutiny. I pitied her just seeing it unfold in the papers. After separating from Thomas, she took a small role on the side to make ends meet, caught the eye of one of the princes and became the public’s arm candy once more – everyone more impressed with how quickly she was able to drop the weight she had gained whilst pregnant than they were with her poetry which was trivialized as oversharing. And this was all before she turned twenty-one. Ban on the other hand did not realise that he was famous until he made the same mistakes most young men do early on at university and was suddenly pained as the useless rest of a political dynasty, who could not go out to buy milk without enduring a seemingly endless onslaught of insults from people he had never met and was never likely to. Naturally he had a breakdown with everything that followed – his father dying and Mary moving overseas temporally, the press was practically rooting for it. He had no time to adjust.

“That all, by the way, is the reason he gets so sensitive about seeing Marie’s picture in your paper.” Though she spoke evenly, Effie could tell her best friend since girlhood wanted to scream. “We are just trying our best,” Ellie continued, “given our means and the positions we hold to give the por girl as normal of a life as possible, something her parents never really got to enjoy. I, personally, never for a moment imagined that it would be possible – I suppose the best we can do is help her understand privilege and how it can be used to help the people who will always hate us for being born into more,” she stopped to rub her temples. “This world, you know, it only exists from the outside. My point is though, owing to either her parents best efforts or her own strength of character, Marie has a good head on her shoulders – don’t count her age against her. I am a bit concerned that
you would ask Ban for advice though … Or Edmund. Or, for that matter, me.”

“You guys are the only ones who could give me anything other than ‘wine’, ‘Xanax’ or both,” Effie tried to smile.

“Do you want those things?” her friend perked up, presumably at the idea that she at last had something helpful on the ready. “Do you want something stronger?”

“Are you carrying?” Effie squinted.

“Effie,” Ellie forced a laugh. “I have to spend four days with my husband’s entire extended family. I have an entire apothecary at hand. What do you need?”

“But I thought you were close with all of the Tarletons,” Effie muttered, reaching for a lose strand of hair to twist into a knot around her finger in hopes of avoiding making the same with her brow. She already had enough fine lines which she felt too young to justify.

“I am,” Ellie rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t mean that for everyone’s best efforts an hour after arriving someone won’t mention a weekend fixture leading William and Clayton to argue over a player they both hope to make a profit off of, leading to musings over what effect Brexit will have over the transfer market, leading to irrational anger at Ban for not divulging everything that is going on in the backrooms of London and Brussels. JJ will doubtlessly complain over the effect this is having on local government, Charlotte will get into the multiple ways in which business is being forced to step in to take care of essential human services elected leadership at every level is failing to provide – which is likely when I and my work will get dragged into it. Emma, who does a lot for disabled children will probably also jump in at this point and Isabel, lost completely to all of this – for by now everyone will be arguing in industry-specific language she hasn’t the facility to comprehend – will end the argument by questioning what any of this has to do with Sam Allardyce’s Everton, which we can all agree is shite,” she told her with the assurance of someone who had lived through the same scenario too many times to count. “And then it will depend on Danny, Marisol or I to reignite tensions by giggling at the club’s plight at some inappropriate moment later on in the evening. The second round gets a bit more personal,” she paused, readjusted. “My dear, I will be nursing a bottle of Scotch from tonight until Monday. All families are like this. If we were going to Edinburgh to spend the holiday with my siblings and their spouses instead, the fights would be slightly more centred towards the living effects of past policy, the language slightly more pretentious and passive-aggressive, but it would be the same shit. It is the same for you whether you are in Dover with your aunt and uncle or in Leicester with the Nantabas. Later, you’ll call these ‘happy memories’ until the calendar forced you to do it again. So wine? Xanax? Or do you want to go straight for the illegal narcotics? I came prepared.”

“My aunt and uncle – thankfully – are in some Norwegian fjord by now. I think I can skip the smack,” Effie smiled. “Wine … would be nice. But you know what would be better?” she considered aloud, “You should come back with us! It will give you a break, or delay the inevitable, Percy’s cousin will have someone to talk to in Marie and John will have someone else to pick on in Ban – which I know sounds admittedly horrible of me but, oh Ellie, I really want this to work,” she gestured towards her boyfriend, high-fiving the teenage girl who he had let help him restart the engine. “Can you at least … can you follow us home and bring John back in your car. Please? Percy told me he loved me this morning. I don’t want him to come to regret it. Plus um … the father is a gardener, you should really see their flower boxes, I think you would.”

“He said he loved you?” Ellie brightened up. “Love?” she mothed again for clarification. Effie nodded, feeling herself blush.

“Of course! I’ll do anything I can to – but there is something you need to do for me in return.”
Effie inhaled. She might have expected as much.

“Please, please, please refrain from printing anything about Mary Robinson or -especially- her daughter in the next coming weeks,” Ellie pleaded. “Ban is absolutely beside himself, losing his first love, and – potentially - his daughter at the same time. We can’t talk about it at home because Maire deals with grief in the same way, actively and obnoxiously ignoring it until it eats her alive and with both of them acting like this I’m simply at a loss. I caught him crying in the kitchen well past midnight,” she explained breathlessly, “worrying that he is doing this all wrong when he saw that piece you published that made Marie seem like one of those fame-driven ingénues whose success owes itself to the fact that certain surnames sell papers to American idiots,” she spat, “because of a photograph taken of her with Kendall, Cara and co. at a charity function I let her help me organise to take her mind off things. Please Effie. She is a kid. She will have the rest of her life to be a useless socialite like me or like my younger, prettier US-based counterparts – but now? The feature has gone around her school, one of her closest friends made a pass at her and she doesn’t know how to handle it, fancying him in a way but being forced to recognise that his infatuation will likely end with her celebrity. Meanwhile, her best friend called her a ‘slut’ because she apparently ‘liked him first’, which Marie maintains is a lie – and I only know any of this because she is not talking to her mother and I feel so … so guilty!” she exclaimed to Effie’s surprise. “About seemingly taking not only Mary’s long-time lover but her daughter as well and it seems so very unfair, I just think – if you could just, and I know it isn’t fair to put the blame on you either, but -”

“Ellie, it is fine, if I knew, if you would have just told me,” she hugged her. It was for the better that Ellie wanted silence for her because she could not find the right words. “Just come to dinner. Pretend to be normal or watch me struggle at it. And you are not a useless socialite. I doubt any of the Kardashians fill the boot of their car with drugs and booze to numb themselves to one another at a family get together.”

“Is it weird to think that I would get on better with, I don’t even know … life if I had Kim’s curves?” Ellie sniffed, fighting to regain her composure.

“Not at all!” Effie exclaimed. “I feel the same way!”

“Bitches.”

“Right?”

“O’rite?” Effie heard in the unmistakeable accent of her favourite loose-lipped politician.

“We are fine. Well, not fine. We’ve come to realise that neither of us has a noteworthy ass,” she explained, looking up to see Ban Tarleton making another questionable fashion statement.

“What the fuck is wrong with women?” he demanded, brow knitted in confused frustration. “Effie, not to overstep but you have the kind of beauty that troubadours were entirely preoccupied with. Ells, you are a porcelain statue of a goddess whom no mortal woman from antiquity until times modern has ever come near to matching – and you two have to audacity to cry over something you see as being absent from your silhouettes?”

“That was … almost poetic,” John smarted him. Effie glared, affixing her hands to her (far too slender) hips.

“I have a lot of endless layovers and far too much time to read,” Ban shrugged, seeming to take the insinuation that he might be more learned than he let on as an insult.

“So are we good?” Ellie asked Percy when he moved to join them.
“Ready to go,” he assured her.

“Wonderful!” she announced. “We’re coming with you.”

“Um -”

“I invited them,” Effie explained to her increasingly uncomfortable boyfriend.

“Oh, not to stay, just to pop in, say hello … chuffer John back in our car to give you love birds what I imagine is some much-needed alone time,” Ellie tried to soften her tone with a wink at Percy to tell that the anger he sensed was not directed at him.

“That’s very kind … but -”

“Percy,” Effie pleaded.

“I’m driving then,” John announced. “I have some familiarity with the car, after all.” Effie shuttered, wondering what she had ever seen in him.

“Is it really so bad that you had to invite my boss?” Percy teased from the driver’s seat.

“No, it is not that I just -”

“I am sorry they are making you so uncomfortable.”

“It isn’t them. It is John or, maybe, it is me.”

“Oh, it isn’t you darling,” he said, leaning forward a little as he singled a lane change.

“I spent the whole day thinking I’ve never done this before, but according to Ellie, I have. We all have. My family is – well, let’s just say I’d rather spend the weekend with yours, side glances and snide remarks aside. I’ve never … this is admittedly a really weird story, but my aunt and uncle ended up meeting at an open day at the boarding school I went to. He was - and is – John’s godfather, and at the time, his legal guardian. We had been dating on and off for around two years when they married so when we went home for the summer holidays, it was not as though – Uncle Samuel already loved me as his niece and Aunt Margaret, well, she took pains to make sure my summers were as close to the school year as they could possibly prove, inviting other children around for our amusement and ensuing that the girls and boys slept as far apart as the restrictions of architecture would allow. So, it is not as though I ever had a ‘meet the parents’ moment from which I can now draw – it was more along the lines of ‘hey, sleep over at mine!’” she laughed, knowing how strange this sounded and, by relation, made her out to be.

“I should have told him months ago. This is all my fault. I … this is sort of embarrassing. I never had a serious girlfriend before, and I realise I am saying that in a way that implies that I had casual relationships, but when you are a fat kid, that is all you are – overlooked. I had a lot of female friends from ballet who came round and it was never a problem, but my mother, she and my dad tried twenty years to have a kid before I happened upon them, and now that she has John to overbear upon as well, she is something of her worst self. Honestly, I think she will lighten up on you. It is just him and you and me and the confused history we can do nothing about – that we honestly ought to have sorted through way back.”
“Way back?” Effie smiled, teasing, “Just how long have you been in love with me, Percy Nantaba?”

“Since … ah, you probably won’t remember this but, I saw you one day in line with a bunch of your colleagues standing outside of a Chinese takeaway. I wasn’t working so none of your friends were nearby to afford me any context, but I said hello anyway and you gave me a radiant smile and greeted me by name – asked me if I was busy, if I was hungry, and when I said I had already eaten you bid some of your staff goodbye so you could join me on my walk. And the whole time you did that thing you do when you get nervous, where you twist the end of your hair and can’t find a direction to focus your eyes – but then you saw something in the part that relaxed you, describing the way the light hit the leaves of a certain tree as only an artist could, disappointed with the photograph you tried to take because it did not quite capture the quality you found so compelling. I was absolutely engrossed in all you had to say, finding that I had, unfortunately, little to offer in return, having never given colour much active though. You thought I was bored and said as much and I … I told you that I found you easily the most fascinating girl I had ever met, that I knew there was an art store somewhere in the area if you want to try to find it. You knew of course where it was, led me there let me buy you a few sponges and a kind of metal slab neither of which I imagined had much to do with painting -”

“A palette-knife doesn’t, it is just for cleaning,” Effie blushed. She had not expected him to be so forthcoming with an answer, especially one that took her so far back, remembered in the same details that stuck out in her mind.

“So the knife is used for cleaning and the sponge …” he squinted, trying not to laugh.

“I mostly use them for texture.”

“Gotcha.”

“Percy, how could I forget that afternoon? I think about it all the time.”

“I thought about it nonstop until you came by a few weeks later with a wrapped canvas meant for me of all people. I opened it to find that you had recreated the leaves in the afternoon light with far more precision than your million-megapixel iPhone camera could capture – and with so much feeling, so much soul that I felt I was on the bench again, hearing you turn something ordinary into the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. When I was finally able to tear my eyes from it, I saw you – again, inexplicably nervous as you awaited my assessment - and I released that everything I thought was completely wrong.”

“Oh? I don’t know if I like the sound of that.”

“Effie, I realised in an instant that you yourself were -and are -the most beautiful sight ever produced by art or nature. You twisted your hair as you asked me if I liked your painting and it took everything I had to say ‘I love it’ rather than ‘I love you.’ Um -”

“What?”

Percy sighed. “That is actually the day I ended up telling my mother about you as well. I know it threw you off a bit, hear referring to you as an accomplished painter when you met in the driveway, but that is the story she knows you from as well and, it isn’t as though I don’t respect you deeply for your business and editorial skills, it just never came up. Maybe because I know you from my work, but not from your work. If that makes any sense.”

“I don’t think of myself as much of an editor today, or much of a friend for that matter,” Effie admitted with a sigh. “A story about Marie that focused, unfortunately, largely on fashion and
physical attributes escaped my censor, not that it should have been printed at all. Her resulting
celebrity at school is causing problems with her classmates, and Ban, who must see so much
symmetry between what he himself went through when the media caught wind of how handsome he
was as a teenager, how the papers turned on him so quickly when he was going through one of
the worst times of his life when his father had taken ill … I’m worried about him. About the whole
family. I know even without me it wouldn’t be easy, but I can’t help --

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You are helping. We will invite them to dine with us when we get
back and in the absolute worst-case scenario, the three will leave knowing that no family dynamic is
perfect.”

“You are perfect though,” Effie smiled, unlatching her seat-bucket to side closer to him. She laid her
head on his shoulder and traced small hearts on his belly, watching the trees in the window become
lampposts and manicured lawns as evening turned to dusk.

“Oh, to be an artist and find beauty in the mundane,” Percy blushed.

“I still want to see you in a leotard.”

“I’ll find a photograph – or, if you are interested, we can swing by my old dance studio tomorrow.”

“Really?!” Effie sat up with a slight jolt.

“We will give each other lessons,” Percy continued, laughing. “I’ll correct your posture and you can
correct my pronunciations in French.”

“I have to be honest with you, it took me around five years to learn how to waltz.”

“It should if you are doing it correctly.”

“I can assure you I’m not,” Effie assured him. “I hated gym at school. Absolutely hated it. I was
always, without question, always the last kid picked for any team – even when one of my closest
friends was making the selection. Mortifying. Still, I preferred ball sport to ballroom because at least
then I could stand somewhere outfield where no one noticed how poorly I was doing.”

“Don’t tell me no one ever asked you to dance,” Percy frowned.

“By my third year … no?” Effie frowned though in time’s passage this had become rather funny to
her. “I think John would intentionally find himself an injury on Sunday to excuse himself from the
activity anyway, if not, well, there was no way he would survive a few spin arounds with me – I
must have injured every boy in my year at some point.”

“I bet I could take you.”

“Big words.”

“I like my chances,” he winked as they pulled into his parent’s driveway behind the sedan that
Edmund Hewlett had strategically gifted at his own wedding when he had been worried that one of
the groomsmen (who himself happened to be dating the man investigating the town of Setauket for a
murder of a senator that had never actually taken place) had noticed something while decorating the
car with shaving cream, shoes and cans that may well have been a matter of police interest. Even as a
newswoman, there were some questions Effie had learned were better left unasked. “How did they
get here before us?” was not, however, one of them.

“I took the scenic route.”
“I’m sorry I missed it.”

“The Midlands aren’t spectacular.”

“I was too busy staring at you, I mean.”

“Hm.”

“What?” Effie asked with a flirtatious smile.

“I don’t recognize the other car,” he remarked as they walked up the driveway.

“You haven’t been home in two years.”

“True.”

The front door opened for them before Percy had a chance to knock.

“We need to talk,” Zeinab Nantaba greeted in a voice that allowed for little argument.

Before Effie could properly panic at her own quick speculations of what John, or perhaps Ban or Ellie had said to ruin what little had been left of her boyfriend’s mother’s better humours, she heard her given called out in a voice she hoped she did not recognise.

No, she assured herself as her mind sought to place the droll, elongated, “Elizabeth!” when it came a second time.

John, she reasoned, had spent the day trying to get under her skin, he was good with children and had likely co-opted Marie - who was quite good at imitations - into his devious designs. It simply could not be -

“Elizabeth, oh! There you are! Finally! You have kept me waiting for ages,” her Aunt Margaret greeted.

“Now,” Mrs Nantaba narrowed her eyes at them both.

Chapter End Notes

It could be that I have a larger readership than I realise, in which case, to clarify what I was banging on about in the beginning – make your weekend 90 minutes longer. This isn’t a football thing. Notes?

Football:

Tony Fernandes is like a poor man’s Mike Ashley, by which I mean his ownership of QPR follows a familiar trajectory of throwing bank in the direction of useless signings, following this up with an ‘austerity’ phase and engaging (in Fernandes’ case) the Lotus Road faithful who want him to sell via Twitter, calling them ‘haters’ and ending every tweet with ‘hmm’ (which is the kind of linguistic tic that I imagine would bother Simcoe very much; but pissing into fireplaces it is not.) In terms of billionaire owners who know nothing about footy, I feel the worst for QPR, actually. Fernandes doesn’t really provide anything fans can laugh about while they cry about their club’s plight. Still, he serves as
a decent enough analogy to British command during the American Revolution if looking at it from a purely economic perspective. Why don’t people learn from history?

Football being used to further anachronisms and misappropriations:

I don’t know if I noted this in H+S when it first came up, but the thing about Simcoe resenting Tarleton being awarded the captaincy on their youth football team isn’t random: Simcoe really did feel overlooked in Tarleton’s favour and wrote at least three letters to Henry Clinton complaining about Cornwallis favouring Tarleton and the little shit thusly receiving the support that seniority dictated should be awarded to him instead. There are several online archives that catalogue the correspondence, all of which I’m sure you have visited time and time before.

The Tarleton family proper earned their fortune in the slave trade, in this universe, Ban’s two older brothers are mentioned as working in sport management, which is doubly advantageous for narrative reasons in that H+S draws heavily on European football as is, and … where else do we talk about buying and selling as it relates to, you know … human beings? There is some dark shit out there about agents, scouts and sporting directors. Why mention Inter? No historical reason, well, no historical reason that has to do with the 18. century anyway. Italy has a more business centred approach to running a club than exists in the UK which I could get into, but after this chapter, do you really want to read an essay about financing?

Just straight historical misappropriations:

Youngest Tarleton son John really did work in local government. That is true. The stories Ellie tells about young Ban and Mary were also barely modernized or adjusted. The record label thing is of course a reality of our times rather than hers and Mary’s marriage was arranged against her objections, but she really did graduate school exceptionally early and was teaching literature at fourteen, which is straight ballin’. Go girls with brains!

Anyway, I think that is all the notes I have for you lovely faces this time. I hope you are all enjoying the bank holiday. XOXO – Tav

Up next: Spinkels versus …
A Contranym

Chapter Summary

Dinner theatre follows an extended cocktail hour.

Chapter Notes

Football analogies never fail me, and I hope that you will forgive me another. I, here in the role of club chairman, find that I am still completely shaken from the last match, still somehow watching in horror though weeks have since passed at my side suffering a defeat while preforming at their absolute best. Mathematically, it is possible for ‘FCHS’ to avoid relegation. Possible, but not probable. It is too late in the season for me to fire the trainer and expect that to generate results, the transfer window is long since closed and even if I should make it to (and through) the play-off, the summer doesn’t look promising.

I’ve already resigned myself to playing out at least a season in the Championship, here, with one or two top-tier players too old to get a favourable transfer and a scrambled together ‘B’-squad (in many cases asked to play out of position because I can neither afford a striker or a back line.) FCHS is in a sorry state, indeed. But if forced to play in a lower division with a subpar side, I promise, we are playing to win. (Ole! Ole! Ole!)

So what does that mean in English? I’ve decided to finish Indefinite Articles to the absolute best of my ability before resuming Hide and Seek proper. No hopping back and forth, no using this as a fun little filler for when the main narrative gets too heavy. This is a place for me to fix the problems that occurred to me far too late to fix in the 20,000 K word disaster of a run that was the thirty-eighth chapter. When it is over, who knows? Maybe I will be fit for direct promotion. Maybe the problems that exist will persist and I’ll need to do the same with one of the other side-narratives, but I guess we won’t know until we get there. Here is to finding out. It will be worth it in the end and I hope I can entertain you a bit in the interim. Cheers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Margaret Spinkels had half a mind to crash her rental into a guardrail. She had not climbed her way to the peaks of the publishing industry and set her flag upon the summit by listening to the opinions of men. The voice on the inbuilt navigation system was bad enough without Samuel’s needing to add to its tired chorus. She had missed her exit. Her husband echoed the mechanic voice informing her of what was now old news.

“I wouldn’t have if you could manage to close your mouth long enough for me to concentrate,” she snapped.

“You are driving too fast,” he told her, same as the beep that signalled every three seconds as a reminder of the posted speed. Margaret refused to slow down just because the world would not keep
pace with her agenda.

“Quickly,” she shot back.

“Pardon?”

“Fast is an adjective, a word describing and/or modifying a noun. Quickly is the adverbial form,” she sneered. “And yes, darling, I am driving. Not you.”

“Pull over,” he insisted.

“Where?” she demanded, the guardrail looking more and more tempting. These thoughts of justifiable mariticide remained mute, however, as Margaret instead opted to voice her concern for the men who had once been made to suffer her husband’s command. This found his hand on her inner thigh and Margaret fighting the smile threatening to part her red painted lips.

“Did you book a hotel?” she asked. Samuel remained silent. Seconds before, she would have appreciated this fact, but now his wordlessness managed to annoy her nearly as much as sloppy English always tended to.

“Samuel,” she warned.

“Margaret,” he returned in the same tone. “I hardly see why any of this is necessary.”

“It is not as though we mean to impose on the Nantabas’ ...” she trailed off, object and abstract alluding her. ‘Hospitality’ was hyperbolic. She refused to accredit the family with anything approaching kindness. What they were doing to Elizabeth and John alike was presenting them with a false fantasy, an affront to every effort she had made to other people’s children. “No matter,” she said. “I’ve changed my mind. Book three rooms rather than two. I don’t want John staying with these people either.”

“Margaret, please,” he sighed.

“It doesn’t escape me that the children are bickering, but if you think for a moment I’d allow either of them to stay -”

“What is the problem? They are adults. John has every right to want to know his family, and Elizabeth -”

“As far as I am concerned, Samuel, we are his family. We sent him through school, through university, saw him clothed, fed and care for. And this woman, this Zeinab has the audacity to insinuate she could have done a better job? He came to visit England without so much as a word to either of us and,” Margret sighed, decelerating the vehicle and the pace of speech as she turned onto a residential street. “I know the situation was never ideal. I know that. But you know that I had very little choice. Eleanor and Eugene couldn’t stay in that home.”

“No one is arguing that.”

“John didn’t want his younger children to know that he was ill, and while hindsight illustrates all of the errors of judgement in taking the four of them in time and again, I had the very best intentions. Same as with Mary Anne and Dean and Luke and Fabienne. Say what you will but I was every bit as much of a mother to all of those children as she is now trying to be to Elizabeth and John. But they are not hers! They are mine! That doesn’t end with eighteen. To think – to think the first I am hearing about Elizabeth being so serious with someone that she would visit his parents for Easter is upon the discovery that they are also trying to play parents to John! Why aren’t they visiting us in
Dover instead?” she pleaded. “Elizabeth and Percy, John and Mary, why – honestly, what have I done to deserve this?”

By the time they pulled in to an otherwise empty driveway Margaret found she was nearly in tears.

“Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,” Ellie whispered of the two women between lips parted by a painted smile of the sort no one in the political classes tried to disguise as being anything but pandering. In language and appearance, she resembled her brother just enough to provide John with a base amusement he might have moved to mock were he not so overburdened with proverbial gift-bearing Greeks. Before him lay a pile of spoils in the form of aperitifs and hors d’oeuvres, some consumed, most ignored as two aging women asked him with every bite or sip if he had any wish they might fulfil in the form of food.

This particular exercise in passive-aggressive politeness, however, struck John as quite odd. It was not as though his life thus far was void of such experiences, for he had the heart of a warrior and inadvertently, it seemed, courted the same company. In this instance, he could not attribute motive to either of the combatants. He was clearly the target of the assault as Ellie’s half-emptied glass remained unquestioned and unfilled. Under any regular circumstance, he imagined, it would be the heart and mind of the princess (now literally ‘of the people’) which would prove the objective.

At home, when Peggy and Aberdeen were in a fight over the sorts of things women who thought much too highly of themselves tended to disagree over (adjustments to the tax code and who was at fault in a celebrity break-up to name but two) there was a benefit to be had. Against all physical logic, beer at the pub which employed them both part-time flowed faster, each was freer with gifting the patronage a shot on the house, and John and the lads in his Sunday-league side crowded the establishment that they too might be victorious in a war that would see none conquered. At the end of the evening, both girls would take home an above-average amount from the tip jar as their harder work warranted; the next day they would do their part to stimulate the economy with their surprise earnings, bumping into one another at Saks, hugging it out and deciding to continue their date at Starbucks where they would agree over over-priced milk-made-warm that they could still enjoy both Taylor Swift and Calvin Harris.

When his long-term girlfriend Mary had it out with her favourite enemy Anna for reasons neither John nor his otherwise-rival Edmund could quite comprehend (as was a weekly occurrence), the spoilers were even greater than getting better service at a dive-bar. If these incidences of unexplainable envy fell in their favour, it gave the lads time to partake in the types of activities the women in their lives would otherwise join forces to protest. Mary liked to clean when she was angry and Anna refused to be outdone by her neighbour. John always wondered at how much time he otherwise spent helping out around the house two hours into delivering marathon massacres in FIFA 18 while the women took turns providing Edmund and himself with beer, snacks, and refusals of their offers of help. Saying ‘thank you’ to the wrong woman at the right time was enough to keep the rivalry going long enough to allow another round. The fact that the night would inevitably end with both Mary and Anna discovering how ridiculous they were behaving (usually after realizing that their respective significant others had already put the children to bed) did not stop them from fighting them same battle on the same field when something miniscule came between them, wording on a church flyer or who had signed up to bring what snack or supply to the preschool their children attended.

But this was different. Though he had long been forced to subscribe to Ban Tarleton’s blanket
assessment that ‘two women, regardless of what their relationship might otherwise be, are bound to find something to fight over if given time and proximity’, Zeinab and Margaret’s spat felt somehow unnatural by every point of comparison.

John Graves Simcoe was well and widely liked in New York. He had never quite considered himself in these terms before, but it now stood to reason that the women in his life (excepting the mothers with a child on the soccer team he coached who were a case unto themselves) were keen to shower him with their attentions in hopes of winning him over to their side, though he had very little opinion over the subjects they felt warranted a show of arms. Here, however, he was an enemy if anything and he was beginning to fear he had fallen into a trap by repeating the phrase ‘thank you’ that had served him so well in the past.

He had raised his voice that morning with his biological brother who had yet to return to the house he was otherwise loath to visit. Percy’s overbearing adoptive mother should thus by all counts be furious with him. Instead, she offered another pastry, for which John was obliged to thank her.

Margaret Spinkels, the wife of his godfather, had never given him the impression that she held him in any regard, even before things had ended badly between himself and her ward. He could reasonably assume that she had come with the intent to bail Effie out of this awkward family drama, but not finding her niece had settled on John to be the subject of her affections.

He glanced at Ellie beside him, herself staring into a tumbler she turned slowly in her hand with some distain. Resenting in the moment that she was not his Hewlett, for Edmund usually lent his strategic prowess to the greater good whereas Ellie seemed to enjoy watching strife, he decided to fire a charge of his own.

“More Whiskey?” he asked. Both Zeinab and Margaret were quick to respond by offering to get him a glass.

“Actually, I was asking Eleanor,” he informed them lightly, causing them to pale in a shared embarrassment of the kind he did not assume they were capable. They both made excuses to excuse themselves momentarily and rose to continue their standoff by the liquor cabinet.

“Do you want mine?” the princess asked coolly. “It is Irish. ‘Whisky’, I fear, is something of a stretch.” He eyes darted to her husband, happily enjoying the same drink on the other side of the room in the company of other retired officers. Before he could respond, John was handed the glass. “We’ve had this argument before. Banastre maintains that Irish whiskey is smoother, I say it lacks character. If one is to name a beverage ‘the water of life’, should one not feel alive while drinking it? Should a sip not remind you that you are very much going to die one day? This … this is nothing more than distillation wasted of false pretence.”

John wondered if his former schoolmate needed her alcohol to taste like smoke to match the surprising fire of the sentiment. “I would honestly have never expected you to hold such strong view on the subject,” he commented.

“And why is that?”

“Added to the fact that you’ve never been much of a drinker, you are the only vegan I’ve ever known not engaged in the practice of conversion by sword that would put the world’s other great religions to shame.”

“Don’t allow my surname or residence to lull you into a false sense of security, when it comes to Whiskey, I’m a Scot through and through,” she responded with limited enthusiasm. “As to my other nutritional particulars, I never talk about veganism because there are only two things in the world that
prove duller topics of conversation than diet – religion, as you rightly cite, and, as my dear husband is so woefully engaged in illustrating, the bureaucratic paperwork and practices that define the modern military experience.” As though he imagined he had heard his name, Ban turned to her, earning himself a smile that spoke of ill thoughts. “It is what all men of a certain rank do in one another’s company. I promise they are not purposefully trying to exclude you, as I promise you don’t want to hear sixteen hours of uninterrupted personal narratives over certain types of processing.”

“I take it you’ve been there before?”

“Many, many times.”

“To married life,” John offered as he handed her back her barely-touched tumbler, replacing it in his hand with the schnapps either of his would-be-mothers had earlier thought to pour.

“Sláinte,” Ellie offered with a hint of sarcasm, directed, he suspected, at the makers of Tullamore Dew until she resumed conversation after what hardly qualified as a sip. “Returning to our boring topics, there is something very Judgement of Solomon to this, you realise.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I’m trying to determine which of your self-described ‘mums’ would be satisfied with cutting you in half.”

“I think poisoning is more a trait of your line, my lady.”

“Ah, I think you are the poison here, John, and I dare say I think you agree. Tell me, what oh what has transpired that Ms Nantaba and Ms Spinkels are fighting for your affections?”

“I honestly haven’t the faintest idea,” he admitted. “Do I detect a hint of envy?”

“Hardly, I’m just amazed that you have two women with no reason to like you at the moment each hoping that you’ll acknowledge her over the other as the one who has the right to fuss over, perhaps at you … maybe it is just where I’m at right now. I fear I lack the instinct,” she said almost mournfully as Marie re-entered the room from whatever escape she and Dembe had found in the youth they shared preventing them from filling themselves on forty-proof and insincere exchanges. The girl handed her father an anachronism of a mobile phone and gave a small performance of annoyance as he moved to show her some familial sign of affection.

“In everything I do I’m caught between ‘you’re not my mum!’ and – to hear Ban tell it – wicked stepmother of the worst kind. I don’t afford Marie the attention and affection she needs as though,” she shook her head. “I feel I am trying harder than anyone with no hope of anything beyond heightened embitterment from all sides. Ban is clearly heartbroken and possibly hung up on his ex, but instead of admitting it, he is given to forcing the same sorts of ersatz conversations around the topic the way he does with everything that causes him shame or mild discomfort, evident in his busying himself with remembered codes for spare parts until just moments ago. I can’t speak to the other officers, but do you really imagine memories of filling out a request form for this or that are the bits of Iraq that wake him in the middle of the night?”

“That isn’t at all how he speaks of you,” John murmured. Instinct quite nearly brought his arm to embrace her before experience instructed otherwise. She clearly needed consolation but was caught in a spell that disallowed any physical comfort. Eleanor could not bear to be touched unless she prepared herself for the sensation by initiating it. She had been that way since she was a girl and though John understood the reasons governing the physiological reactions his present company was given to, it gave him pause all the same. Returning his hand to his kneecap he felt his fingers fall into
an unrhythmic tap he had not noticed in quite some time. It was strange the small things that severed
ties and served to open old scars.

“It is how he speaks to me that matters, I’d argue,” Ellie said, placing her stead hand over his shaking
one. John nearly blinked.

“What would be the point?” she smiled deceptively, “to that end, wherever shall you find the time?”

Zeinab and Margaret returned to the coffee table with every beverage but.

John, realising that his sometimes-friend needed some gesture of solidarity, elected the Scotch,
pouring her a glass before filling his own. Margaret smiled approvingly. Zeinab looked crestfallen.
John took a sip and choked, deciding that ‘water of life’ must be a contranym and questioning his
masochistic tendencies and the situations in which they manifested.

“And?” Dembe asked, wiping her eyes form their reaction to onions.

“It is like an American film,” Marie shrugged. “For all of the explosions and excessive usage of
pyrotechnics that define an industry standard, the plot is dull, the jokes are old and the drama poorly
acted. Your aunt and Ms Spinkels are still attempting to smother John in sweets and schnapps,
everyone who ever wore camo is still talking about insufficient support abroad and Ellie is probably
mentally living out the mantra of ‘Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you
meet,’” she quoted in a shockingly close mimic of James Mattis.

“God bless America,” Dembe laughed.

“Right?” Marie returned. She was four years younger than Dembe, and though the university student
had every number of preconceived notions of the little tart prior to her showing up at her aunt and
uncle’s doorstep with her sort-of cousin, Britain’s favourite fascist and the princess who had forsaken
her crown of thistles for fields of poppy, she could easily see the two of them hanging out even if she
were not otherwise want to conversation. Granted, the girl was a spoiled, sheltered, skinny little bitch
who would likely never amount to anything of merit for all of the money spent on her public-school
education, but she was funny, and even more surprisingly, she seemed to know how to cook. The
two had shaken hands and exchanged side glances when their respective fathers had been called
back to the front by the highest ranked among them, an Admiral of the White (and currently of the
Whiskey) before whom insubordination was all but unthinkable. Samuel Graves had offered both
Marie and herself a glass to raise to comradery – having worked out based on the pictures displayed
on the fireplace mantel that her father as Lt. Nantaba had served under him on the HMS Exeter in the
Falkland War, that her uncle had been a petty chief on the Gloucester prior to it being in his
command, and that the ship had supported a land operation lead in part by Col. Tarleton. They were
all fast friends, brothers in arms once more. The forty-proof was likely the facilitator of this sudden
solidarity. That – or having been in the company of his wife for the past fifteen years and her aunt for
all of fifteen minutes prior to John returning with uninvited guests – the admiral was exercising
diplomacy, securing strategic allegiances to spare himself from the crossfire.

Denied the libation that tricked the officer core into believing that their conversation was both
interesting and worth having by equally strict fathers, the whole of the evening felt to both girls like a
shot to the head. Dembe glanced about. Sitting with her aunt, the editor of Vogue, and the poor man caught in their war of affections which had begun just prior to his arrival with ‘how dare’ and possessive pronouns seemed an even worse option than hearing the stories her father was want to tell with a half-filled tumbler in his hand. She and Marie had thus become mates out of mimic, reading each other’s facial exaggerated expressions and returning bored looks of their own until rolling eyes flipped frowns and they found themselves fighting the urge to laugh. When the kitchen timer sounded, Dembe offered to get the bread out of the oven and Marie offered to help. They had since been engaged in this task for the better part of an hour.

When it became clear that Zeinab had no intention of surrendering her metaphorical ground to tend to the very real ground goat (and beef which they had gone to purchase for Effie,) Marie decided that the two of them had rather ought to tend to this matter as well. She pulled her long, loose hair into a pony tail and before Dembe had noticed the small bruise on her neck began begging her not to mention anything to her dad. Dembe laughed at the thought of her having anything to say to a tory politician whatsoever and assured Marie that her secret was safe. She had once been fifteen and feared her parents finding out about any number of the small sins she sought to escape boredom in. At nineteen, she remained hesitant to bring a boyfriend home. After seeing the reception Effie Gwillim had received, Dembe doubted that she ever would subject a man she loved to the same.

“Effie isn’t that bad though,” Marie defended. Finding Dembe’s eyes were still fixed on her hickey, she added in the same tone, “And believe me, he is not my boyfriend. He is just think kid I’m kind of friends with although I’m certain he would claim otherwise. We want to go to some dumb school function together just to make fun of it, but my best friend is jealous and my dad hates him -”

“He black?” Dembe guessed.

“No?”

“Right. I bet you don’t have many people of colour at a school like yours.”

“It is mixed?”

“Vouchers to fill quotas?” Dembe asked, somewhat accusingly, believing an even division of taxes among district schools was a better solution than selecting a few promising children from poorer backgrounds to fill seats in a class made up of the nation’s most privileged. Ban Tarleton, she was certain, would disagree.

“Uh … no,” she squinted. “I don’t think – my cousins are mixed race and my aunt and uncle who live nearby have loads more money than my dad or even my mum – maybe not Ellie, but I’m pretty sure they pay full tuition. If would be kind of bullshit if they didn’t, wouldn’t it?” Marie asked, genuinely confused by the sentiment. “I don’t mean that in a mean way or anything.”

“I -neither did I, I’m sorry,” Dembe resigned. Marie found and apron and began chopping peppers, entertaining Dembe with imitations of everyone whose name came up in the flow of conversation, asking her about what Belfast was like, what university was like, if she missed Leicester and if she supported the local team (the answers to which were, respectively, ‘brilliant!’; ‘easier than revising for the GCSEs no matter what your teachers tell you now’; ‘sometimes’ and ‘I hopped on the bandwagon when we won the league but I couldn’t like … name a single player if quizzed on it.’) Marie in turn maintained that her own school was shite, just something men in court wigs liked to mention to form some kind of understanding that they were forced to memorize the same information in the same place from the same hundred-year old men and had elected to send their children to follow in this proud tradition of insuring that no one in parliament understood today’s problems half as well as they did the Wars of the Roses, asking again that none of this be repeated. She was not allowed to curse and her father would be quite cross.
“I’m reading history at Queen’s, trust me, everyone swears when it comes to Yorks and Lancasters,” she smiled. “That actually gives me some hope, crazy as it sounds. I think with history, you can study any topic and come away having learned exactly the same lesson, which isn’t to say history repeats itself because there are always culture specific particulars it would be ignorant to ignore, but … what you are really learning is how to be analytical, which helps in any profession.”

“But no one learns from history.”

“They do, the problem is that no one sees themselves as being on the wrong side of it.”

“But we will never know, will we? Who was right I mean. History isn’t written until everyone who remembers it is dead, otherwise it is just news and that is all fake. You’ve met Effie, right?” she smirked, listing off a number of past headlines while twisting a strand of her hair and glancing back and fourth to her phone until the device interrupted the monologue. Her half-sister was on the line, she told. Dembe watched as Marie listened to the little girl for five minutes straight as she rapidly relayed everything she and her mum and her mum’s boyfriend and his children had seen that day at Parc Astérix where they were on holiday. When she finished, Marie asked if she wanted to speak to their dad. “She has the cutest accent,” the blonde smiled before exiting the kitchen. Dembe hoped she would be treated to another impression when the girl returned.

“How drunk does you dad have to get before he stops talking about problems in the supply chain and gets started on scars and tattoos obtained abroad?” she asked of Marie’s adventure to the front lines, having become confused in the five minutes she was left alone, trying to heat sauce in the microwave instead of on the stove and -upon seeing the bloodbath that ensued – electing to simply chop more onions until the wee general returned with something more of a plan.

“I wish mine were that interesting,” Marie answered. “His hand and arm have been like that since I was a baby and to this day I have only heard the story second hand. Um. That sounded like a pun, I didn’t mean -I’m not lame like that.”

“You’re alright, Love,” Dembe smiled as the younger girl put her borrowed apron back on and resumed grinding tofu through a device ordinarily used for making noodles to give it the texture of hack.

“I never took you for someone who liked to cook,” she commented offhand, understanding as soon as she spoke how strange that must sound to Marie, whom she had known for scarcely an hour and only within the context of the kitchen to which they had escaped to under the pretence of helping Aunt Zeinab.

“I don’t know, my dad is kind of a Nazi about it,” Marie said, again clearly unaware of the context in which one would typically use that term to describe her father. “I’ve been helping him in the kitchen since I was little. Some of his friends growing up had some fairly severe nutritional deficits and he is thusly fanatic about making sure that everyone we live with or who visits gets … a balanced meal, I guess? My friends all make fun of it but … I don’t know. It is kind of our thing we do together. He had to learn to do normal people stuff as part of his physical therapy, and he had me help with like, opening cans and holding things he needed to cut, but now we will plan menus together and try to come up with vegan substitutes for when Ellie’s around so she can eat sort of the same thing. The Keema recipe – the original one with goat – Percy gave that to us, so I’ve made it before, but the Ellie version is my own,” she said with a little bit of pride. “It is not quite the same but it is not bad,
which I guess is the best that can be said of substitutions.”

“Your dad eats goat meat?”

“Well it isn’t as thought he is going to eat tofu,” Marie blinked. “You are not the only one to raise an eyebrow but I don’t really know why that is surprising to anyone at all. Keema you can eat with one hand without it looking odd, which I think is his primary concern dining with any extended company. Like he can’t go out and order steak or anything because it takes his so long to cut it himself and I guess that still shames him on some level. I offered to help once, I mean, when I was like seven or eight and I haven’t seen him order a meal like that at a restaurant since. It doesn’t matter though, goat is a great source of lean protein and it has loads of B12 which helps clear up your skin and also it has potassium which helps control blood pressure and niacin which increases energy metabolism and,” she paused, worrying that what she was saying sounded awkward as school-aged girls often did, “I know too much about this kind of thing. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t know any of that,” Dembe said. “I think it is cool that you do though. And Ban Tarleton eats Pakistani food because he is too embarrassed about the way he looks eating meat and potatoes. Brilliant, that,” she shook her head. Dembe would bring this up later at dinner to the MP directly when he asked for seconds. He, in turn, would answer her politely, respectively even, that he was happy to accept and embrace other people’s cultures so long as the people binging their traditions with them to Britain respected English culture and common law. Because politics by their very nature failed to understand society, Dembe would leave the exchange thinking Marie’s father-figure more of a bigot than she had when all she’d known of the man was his unwavering support of Brexit, presuming all of the racist rhetoric the media was quick to ascribe in any incidence of isolationist economic beliefs. Marie was either unaware, or so hyper-conscious of the way her dad came across that it ceased to bother her.

“Did you learn that from Percy?” she asked.

“The recipe? To be honest I am following your lead. My dad is more of a microwave dinner type of guy. We only really eat this stuff when we come ‘round at the weekend.”

“No, your feet,” Marie clarified, pointing.

Dembe looked down and saw that she was standing with her heels together and her toes spread apart.

“No! No, oh my gosh. I quit dancing when I was twelve. Puberty was none to kind,” she said, indicating to an average-sized waist she still was not satisfied with. “I grew out before I grew up and suddenly couldn’t stand how I looked in the mirrors next to all of my skinny friends. Percy kept going though. His school wasn’t far from my studio, so when he was himself a young teen and I was four, five, he would come to pick me up and we would take the bus home together – our house is just down the street. But sometimes class would run late and he would practice with us – I think Billy Elliot came out at around the same time. Anyway, then my dance instructor told him that he ought to take a course too, and he did, and then I had to wait around for an extra hour and a half and do my homework by myself while I waited on his fat ass. But he continued it all through university, long after I’d quit. He became obsessed with this idea that his birth mum had been a dancer and even though I doubted he wanted to follow in her footsteps, he wanted to be able to mimic what her feet could do.”

“Kathrine Simcoe, yeah she was one of Britain’s best. Sad what happened to her though.”

“All dancers have short careers,” Dembe shrugged. Percy had stopped talking about his mother since meeting his brother. A first-person account of a prima ballerina who got pregnant at twenty and went
mad when she injured her pelvic bone in childbirth and was told she would never dance again was probably worse-sounding than that which had been written in her Wikipedia entry. Zeinab, on the contrary, was satisfied enough with whatever John had said to get rid of this ghost that she instantly accepted this stranger as a second son. The American was just beginning to be made aware that such was as much of a curse as it could possibly be considered a blessing. “Every woman in this story is a jealous-type, I think,” Dembe pondered. “Kathrine couldn’t stand what having kids did to her, my Auntie well … she can’t have kids at all as the result of a female circumcision that went wrong and got infected when she was little. That is why she is in her line of charity work now, or was I guess, before she retired. I think finding Percy felt like things had come full circle, that this was the child she was always meant to have, and then Kathrine who hadn’t wanted him in the first place came back from the dead to snatch him back from her. And now she sees John as the natural extension to our small family … and then there is Margaret. Kind of like his foster mum cum ex-mother in law who feels hurt in the same way my aunt did when Percy started searching for his birth family. Except they aren’t kids anymore. But is it sad all the same.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Marie said. “My dad is here and everyone can just focus all of their hatred on him which is what always happens. Your auntie and Mags will have forgotten each other by supper. I think he kind of gets a rush from it though, so it is kind of like, whatever – have at it. As to Percy, he is teaching me some footwork in secret to help with fencing since maestro says I need it and I don’t want to go anywhere where they would make me wear tights and a tutu.”

Dembe laughed.

“What I mean is, he is like, okay with it – he enjoys it. It isn’t like he tells me to pirouette with a tear in his eye for a woman he never knew. But it isn’t the kids that get all emotional about these sorts of things, is it?” she shifted. “Like my mum, fucking – I know she is sick and that, but now that she thinks she isn’t going to get better she wants me to meet this random bloke who may be my biological father, and my dad is like ‘oi, yea – spiffing idea, that.’ And no one gives a damn that I don’t want to, that I already have a dad – except for maybe Ellie but that is only because she wants me and my mum to make up so she doesn’t have to assume that role. Which I don’t even want her too. Like I am not mad about whatever happened fifteen years ago – they are, and everyone is taking it out on me. If I was Percy or John I would just … leave and go somewhere else. They can both drive.”

“Well I think that might be Percy’s plan,” Dembe frowned, looking at the clock. “I’m sorry about your mum. And my parents are divorced too, so I know what that is like. Kind of. My mother has a new family now and doesn’t want me around to mess things up. You are luckier than you think, having a bunch of kind-of parents. So are the Simcoes, by that measure. I only have my dad.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t -”

“No, it is alright, neither did I, I mean. My dad is the best, when he talking about Navy stuff, that is,” she tried to smile. A high-pitched shriek from the other side of the door stopped her short. She reached to turn the air vent over the stove down a degree that she and Marie could better listen.

“I take it Effie is back,” she whispered.

“I hate that woman,” Zeinab Nantaba hissed at her son over the woman dragging her niece into a crowded sitting room. “I don’t know what Effie thought she was doing in inviting these people – but
“And here I thought you meant to pass yourself a pinnacle of politeness,” he said softly in a tone comparable to a scream.

“‘Polite’, Percy, is not showing up unannounced,” his mother spat back.

“Oh, you mean like John then?” he asked with arched eyebrows, now meeting her stance.

“I invited him! I didn’t invite his and Effie’s evidently shared foster family. Good God! What is wrong with these people, it is almost incest -”

“Jesus.”

“And because she can’t have him, she has stuck her claws into you. Little wonder she is so close to that Hewlett girl. You know what the mother was like. Is that really the way you want to end up, Percy?”

It was common knowledge that the aristocracy intermarried. As to what else his mother meant to insinuate by casting her house guests in the roles played out by most recent incarnation of this royal love-triangle he could not fathom and was not want to try. Furthermore, no one in his childhood home was at fault for the events of the past decades that had served to remind the world how cold Scottish winters could prove. He hated the comparison and found he was coming to resent his mother for suggesting it.

“Who are you to pass judgement?” he demanded. “On Ellie, too, now? Mother, you are embarrassing me. I’m shocked that you are not embarrassed of yourself.”

“Are you,” Zeinab swallowed, taking a step back. “Are you embarrassed of me Percy, of, of this -” she gestured vaguely by opening her arms. It was not surrender. It was a feint retreat. Percy folded his arms. He had fought too many battles to fall victim to these tactics. “Before all your fine friends,” his mother moaned with a drama she could not possible expect him to accept as genuine.

“Oh of the situation you are feeding – yes!” Percy interrupted, unable to give his mother the audience she craved. “I am bloody well ashamed. I don’t even need to hear what happened. After this morning, I can easily imagine you treating our other guests with the same unwarranted distain you showed Effie over tea.” Zeinab’s eyes widened and watered. She made no move to apologise, but Percy softened all the same. “Mum! Hey, I am not abandoning you. I’m seeing someone … someone I hoped you might want to get to know.”

“Not abandoning me,” Zeinab muttered. “I’m not afraid of her stealing you away, Percy, sitting with them, I’m worried that you want to leave. That the society working for Lady Eleanor -”

“She’s not a lady,” he corrected.

“I should say!”
Percy sighed and shook his head. His mother, it seemed was not jealous of Effie, rather, she was envious of everyone, something she insisted on projecting upon him that she might find ease in her own fatal flaws. He wondered how much he was at blame for her lack of understanding. Perhaps he might have broached the topic of having found the woman he imagined he might one day want to marry with the words ‘exceedingly rich’ rather than ‘exceptionally clever’, realising in the same though that he had mentioned that Effie was a childhood friended of both his boss and her husband. Zeinab Nantaba had thus every reason to infer that the woman he was seeing shared the same Oxbridge background and had been given nearly a year to come up with erroneous reasons as to how she herself might not measure up. Percy had the fortune of having grown up in a big house on a quiet street. His father owned a successful business and his mother made decent money in working for an ironically designated non-profit that had let her travel the world and finance him semesters abroad in both Greece and North America.

“I’m worried that theirs is the life you always wanted to lead, that you should have led, that you would have had … Oh, Percy! I wish I could have provided you with everything Margaret gave to Effie and John, I wish -”

Percy wondered if the real problem his mother had with Effie was that she had always expected him to marry a girl less affluent than himself. Someone whom she could watch struggle to meet the standards she had set rather than the other way around.

“Mum. Stop. I was happy growing up here with you and Dad. Is it really the worst thing in the world, to imagine that I am happy now as well?”

“No, no I -”

“You have no reason to feel ashamed before these people – none. I don’t know Admiral Graves or Ms Spinkels, but I know that Effie couldn’t have come from a home that taught her to meet the world with contempt. You were making her nervous earlier. That is all. As to the Tarletons, Ban is the poorest man in politics and Ellie doesn’t understand the way money works well enough to be classist. Look Mum, no one has any say in the circumstances into which they were born and raised. Excepting John perhaps, the people out there treat everyone with respect, something you taught me to do, something I can’t believe is suddenly a struggle for you.”

“John -”

“Thinks that I am after Effie’s money the same way he thought I was after his,” Percy summarised. “You, by the way, really aren’t helping my case here.”

“Do not accuse me of creating the problems you have with your brother -”

“He’s not my brother.”

“You have not been home in two years!” she exclaimed, growing louder with every word. “Two years! And now it feels like you are only here to show me how much better you have it now.”

“Mum, I can’t do this. Please, please – can’t you just try to -”

“I have to check on dinner,” Zeinab threw up her hands.

“Fine.”

When Percy turned to leave however, his mother followed him into the living room. There, he found John and Effie sitting snugly together on the couch. Beside Ellie in the adjacent chairs, a woman he recognised as Margaret Spinkels from the pictures in Effie’s flat was telling a story that both his
girlfriend and his boss seemed to find terribly amusing. John meanwhile, seemed unnerved.

“So, what are we talking about?” Zeinab asked with forced cheer.

“Nothing that would interest you, I’m sure,” Margaret dismissed.

“John? Grab a drink with me?” Percy offered. His fellow ginger rose with a look of relief that only lasted a moment. After exchanging a short greeting with Percy’s father, his Uncle Joseph and the admiral and taking what remained from a flash of something Irish Ellie would likely say was better off being mixed with cola or coffee, the two stepped outside at Percy’s request.

“Smoke?” John asked.

“No, thank you,” Percy replied, bending to pet the puppy excited by his company. He turned to see John looking down upon him in contempt when his biological brother spoke.

“To what then do I owe this pleasure, or am I guilty of some new offence of which I am as of yet unaware?”

“Jesus Christ you fit in with this family,” Percy murmured. “No John. I just wanted to get some fresh air and you looked like you could you a breather as well.”

“Thank you?” John tried. He was right to be sceptic. Percy did, in fact, have much to say.

“Whatever your feelings towards me,” he started, “please, for Effie’s sake – can we not do this? Not this weekend. Bringing a girl home is hard enough without having to clean up one mess after another.”

“I …”

“What?”

“What?”

“Just … what you said … your turn of phrase. I shouldn’t have come.”

“No one is saying that,” Percy frowned.

“Not because of anything that has happened here,” John replied distantly. “I should be at home with my girlfriend, our children, I don’t know … I just wanted something I’m likely not meant to find.”

“Well you have certainly gone out of your way to find problems where no one else would seek to look,” Percy agreed.

“To be fair, Margaret Spinkels is the most clinging, possessive person -”

“You’ve met my mum then?” Percy forced himself to laugh.

“I haven’t spoken to them in years. My godfather and his wife I mean. I had no idea they still thought of me as family,” John relayed with a regret that was audible but unplaceable in his words. “I had no idea they did to begin with.”

Percy did not know what to say, if anything he could think up would prove especially helpful. In the quiet that followed they heard Ban Tarleton from the far end of the garden, reciting a children’s book about an old house in Paris that was covered with vines as he had many times before. Percy guessed that he had long committed the entire series to memory. Were Marie outside, she would likely be mouthing along.
“John,” Percy squinted as he heard the MP struggling to convince his younger child that nothing in Paris outside of the amusement park where she was camped was actually worth seeing, likely regretting not taking present geography into account in his story selection as he found just how hard it was to hold one’s own in a debate with a five-year-old, “how much do you know about Brexit?”

“More than most, which is to say, strikingly little. Why?”

“Perfect. I have an idea on how to shift tensions, make our respective mums forget their spat that we might all enjoy supper as much as possible. Mr Tarleton!” he called out.

“Oh, please no,” John murmured.

“Oi, Ban is o’rite, yea?” the esteemed minister of parliament answered merrily as he hastened to join them in the light of the back porch. “You’re not working and even if you were – shit Love, you call me like that and I fret meeting a member of the press out here on holiday.”

“Apologies, I -”

“What can I help you with, then?”

“Do you have any great interest in dinner theatre?” John asked flatly.

“Aye?”

“That is your solution?” John gaped. “Ban … you would be creating conditions that would lead to monopoly … you are bayerning. That is what this is in terms you might understand. In the end you are hurting everyone, including yourself.”

The two men that had dominated much of the evening’s discussion sat across from one another at the far ends of the table. From Effie’s position near the middle, facing Zeinab whose eyes she wouldn’t meet, she had a good idea that something in the argument was amiss – that, or she had succumbed to the exhaustion of shifting her head from side to side every few seconds.

“Bayerning?” Ban snorted. “Christ, you ask too much if you expect me to do this with a straight face.”

Collecting himself from a short fit of suppressed laughter, he continued, “That isn’t even a real word. That is just something they made up in broadcasting so they could force continental football what no one gives a damn about into the conversation. Effie, is that a word?”

She blinked, questioning when the conversation had shifted to sport. The last she had been aware, the two were talking about the inner workings of one of her companies without expressively stating that she had been the majority shareholder for nearly two years, hoping that fact would not come out with her being drug into the debate on linguistic grounds. “I’d have gone with ‘nepotism’, but ‘to bayern’ is in the dictionary,” she swallowed. Zeinab, she noticed, had turned her evil eye from her and her aunt to Tarleton who seemed more bothered by her answer than Simcoe’s assessment or the apparent ire of their host.

“How’s that -”
“The proposal would create conditions in which smaller companies would need to see off vital assets in order to stay competitive,” John offered.

“Foreign owned companies operating within the UK would have to if they intend to continue operation unless a significant percentage of their employees hold British passports,” Ban clarified, momentarily resuming the elegant manner in which he spoke whilst reading from a teleprompter. “I don’t see the problem with that. I’m sorry. It forces job growth and market expansion -”

“No, it increases operational costs and cuts down on efficiency and generally goes against every economic principal we’ve had since Adam Smith,” John argued. “You are going to turn England into the Bundesliga.”

“What do you care? Per your own analogy you play for the Bayern Munich of the energy sector.”

“I care because without a competitive league we all suffer. Germany lost a direct qualification spot in the Europa League this year. Germany,” he stressed, “who won the last World Cup -doesn’t that say anything to you in itself?”

“How you want to put that on Uli Hoeneß though?” Ban blinked.

“You are forcing your competition to sell their strongest assets in order to self-finance which leads to widespread instability. Looking at how this benefits you in the short term, the corporation that bear’s your wife’s maiden name and whose market success directly benefits your constituency may well profit in the immediate future, but, as I myself am proof, we operate abroad as well and you’ve made that coemption damn near impossible for everyone. A handful of firms in various private sectors already hold the best British talent to themselves – you think anyone is going to want to stay when there is more to be made elsewhere? You think you are going to attract foreign talent to a league as it were with increasingly limited opportunities to sell itself to a global audience because of the greed of-”

“Brexit means Brexit,” Ban shrugged, turning his attention to asking for seconds and falling into a conversation with his daughter and the Nantaba seated beside her.


“Headline worthy, that,” Margaret smiled at him. Effie grinned at the slight upturn of her aunt’s lips, happy to see her approve of her boyfriend if only in this small gesture.

“You can be Franz Ban-kenbauer and I’m Uli Hew-neß,” Ellie said after a moment, taunting her increasingly annoyed husband while making Marie giggle.

“Can I use that?” Effie asked. Ellie replied by leaning over and kissed her cheek.

“You’re not honestly going to give press to this poor analogy,” Ban sighed.

“If you every expand your pack of dogs,” John suggested, “I’m going to use Hew-neß on Edmund every match day ad infinitum. Nice one Ells,” he raised his glass.


“The compliment is yours. You ought not have expected him to understand, though,” Ellie said with a hint of charm. “Ban has less of a grasp on football than he does on business -”

“You -”
“You remember work experience, right?” Ellie interrupted whatever defence her husband was readying himself to offer, winking at her other former classmates.

“Don’t,” Ban sighed, resigning to a defeat Effie supposed he was reminded of every match day.

“I don’t even like football and I love the work experience story,” she squealed.

“What is the work experience story?” Marie asked.

“Okay,” Ellie smiled darkly, moving her hands apart as though she meant to set a stage for her step daughter and anyone else who cared to listen. “When we were all sixteen, seventeen…”

“So in like the mid-eighteenth century,” Marie muttered to Dembe.

“You see what you have to look forward to?” Ban asked John with a gesture to the girls. Simcoe opened his mouth to respond but before he could Ellie bid them all to be silent.

“We had to do a two-week work experience directly before Easter break which your father was late to apply for because he did not think it was mandatory – that we were all cheating ourselves out of a full month’s worth of holiday in favour of, what did you call it at the time, darling? Another useless line item on our CVs?”

“In all fairness, that is essentially what it was,” John said.

“Speak for yourself,” Effie smiled. “I did mine at US Vogue and got my driver’s licence on the same hop across the pond.”

“John, didn’t you go HSBC?” her uncle inquired.

“Yes.”

“Did you always know you wanted to work in financing?” Zeinab asked.

“Well,” he answered plainly, “after my work-experience I defiantly knew I didn’t want to ever make another cup of coffee so long as I lived.”

“I did mine at a cattle farm in Argentina,” Ellie offered.

“Bet that was useful,” Ban muttered.

“Seventy percent of Scotland’s industry is agricultural, so yes, I’d quite say it was. But Ban here,” she again addressed the table, “waited until the absolute last minute and not even Witherspoon’s would take him. Deciding that he didn’t want to hang around school when no one else was there, doing the work experience our beloved institution then thought to assign him -which would have essentially been mowing the lawn for a fortnight while the groundkeeper drank in his shed - he rang both of his older brothers up asking if he could intern for them.”

“They both answered no for reasons obvious,” Effie continued. “So Ban cried to his father who then offered a financial incentive.”

“And I found myself in Italy a few days later learning how marvellously dull a scout’s job actually is. End of story.”

“Not quite,” John smiled. “Clayton mentioned something about how one needs to observe a player’s behaviour off-pitch. Why is he available at this price? Is he out clubbing? Any questionable consumption habits? And you, old friend, saw this as an opportunity for a night out with a few of the
lads on trail at the academy. Tell us, how did that end?”

“In jail.”

“And with you, laughingly no doubt, giving your brother your honest assessment that there was no way he should recommend a player he was rather interested in to his bosses. How did that work out, ultimately? Anything become of that? Where is he playing now?”

“Man City,” Ban buried his face in his hand.

“The closest thing England has to a Bayern … at least in terms of running away with the league,” Marie wondered at her father with wide eyes. “You are really bad at this.”

“This is why you ought not to do business by appealing to and exploiting people’s worst tendencies and using them to justify your own misbehaviour,” John informed her.

“I wish I went to your school,” Marie replied. “It sounds like it was more fun than mine is.”

“We are probably the reason boarding is no longer an option,” Ellie admitted. Effie thought to kick her under the table, but the number of legs hers could theoretically reach gave her pause.

“The reason boarding is no longer an option is complete incompetence on behalf of the staff,” Margaret corrected. “We entrusted them our children’s safety and well being and were repeated disappointed. None of you ever caused problems when you spent your summers in Dover.”

This, Effie knew, was exaggeration at best. At worst, it was a means of reminding Zeinab that everything she had done as a foster parent had been done at a larger scale on the other end of the country at around the same time. John Graves Simcoe had been hers first, which seemed to Effie a ridiculous sentiment to begin with an absolute pack of nonsense when her aunt was the one making the implication. She wished the topic to return to market trends or ever sport.

“You were far stricter than a core of retired commanders, Ma’am,” John slighted, to Effie’s mind, most unhelpfully.

“You clearly needed discipline,” Margaret returned.

Ban laughed. “Marie, Ms Spinkels is right, there is no way I’d have let you go to York even if it was an option. But yeah, that is our shared legacy, ‘innit? As soon as we had all graduated they shut the place down. It only stayed open for as long as it did because as I recall Admiral Graves had paid the full of John’s tuition upfront and the institution was in no position to return the deposit.”

“I had originally meant for him to go to Eton,” Samuel explained to the two friends he had made in the cocktail hour he had likely used his rank to force them into, “but they would not accept him mid term and at the end of John’s first year he had a spot of trouble with another student and a transfer was no longer an option. Not wanting him to be expelled, I made a deposit on tuition and the other student left instead on his own accord.”

“My brother Edmund,” Ellie clarified to the brothers Nantaba.

“It had been different when I was in attendance,” Margaret tried to justify to Zeinab.

“Thank God you didn’t end up at Eton though,” Ban gaped at the mere suggestion that his former dorm mate might well have ended up at a more famous military academy. “Anyone who thinks we were a shambolic bunch clearly never met them on the field. Poor JJ wound up there after our doors closed. Imagine going form winning everything to – I don’t actually know what Eton’s record was,
we always beat them though. Always. In everything. Even sport our school didn’t otherwise have.”

“That sounds hyperbolic,” Marie muttered.

“I assure you, Miss, ‘tis not.”

“Oh, we used to have a song we would sing against them too,” Effie laughed.

“I remember doing that during musters and drills,” Ellie smiled.

“Teach me the song,” Marie begged. “I have a friend who used to go to Eton, I’m sure he would appreciate -”

“Silence,” Ban commanded. “We are done talking about how much we all hate our old rivals.”

“The boy I was telling you about earlier,” Marie clarified to Dembe in hushed tones. “Oh – okay, gotcha,” Percy’s cousin winked, making Effie wonder how much they had shared. Her eyes followed the conversation to Percy’s, missing the excitement of keeping things secret from well-intentioned adults.

“Susan doesn’t care anymore, by the way,” Marie told her dad. “Charles asked her to the dance and now that she has satisfied herself an invite, things are fine between us. I knew it was never about that. She just can’t stand not getting all of the attention all of the time.”

“Kiddo, that is not why I forbid you from going.”

“Dad. It is a school sponsored party. It is going to be lame no matter what and anyway, it is not like it is a date-date, we are just going as friends.”

“Saying a word twice doesn’t change its meaning and that last clause might better have been phrased as a conditional. ‘If my father had any mind to let me-”

“Oh. My. Fucking. God. We are just mates -”

“Language!”

“Sorry.”

“Apologise to Mr and Mrs Nantaba as well,” Ban ordered.

“I’m sorry.”

Zeinab nodded.

“We are all sorry,” Effie said. “John, Ban, Ellie and I, we all went to school together and … these are kind of my brothers and sisters insofar as I have any.”

“Kind of?” Ban teased. “I gave you my blood, you are my sister far as I’m concerned.”

“I was going to name the twins after these two until a nurse happened to overhear and gave a convincing counter argument,” John said, indicating to she and Ellie with a loose gesture.

“John is my fake cousin. Or was my fake cousin. It is weird, I don’t hold any hereditary rights but I am still required to attend stately functions. It is the worst of both worlds.”

“Oh! John! On that note I have something to tell you later about the Royal Wedding. Remind me on
“it later, yea?”

“What did she say, the nurse?” Zeinab asked.

“It is not exactly appropriate for your table, Mrs Nantaba,” John replied.

“Well now we must hear, old sport,” Samuel encouraged.

“In Turkish Kurdistan, ‘Eleanor and Elizabeth’ is evidently slang for … self-fulfilment,” John said with an embarrassment that found Effie’s face.

“Oh my,” Zeinab swallowed a laugh, likely, Effie worried, at her reddened cheeks.

“What?” Marie asked.

“Okay, Ban, what do you have to tell me about the marriage of Prince Harry to Ms Meghan Markel that apparently can’t be said over dinner?” John cleared his throat, clearly keen to ignore the teen’s question.

Ban shook his head. “It is sometimes hard to a gauge what your reaction might be.”

“Try me.”

“O’rite, I was meant to be in it, but then there was a scandal a few weeks back around my unintentionally getting the pope to bless Edmund and Anna’s unborn child – which, I didn’t, I mean, I frankly don’t enjoy that kind of influence but was blamed none the less. Any road, since I can’t attend the ceremony now, do you want to venture a guess as to what the sovereign asked of me instead?” he laughed. “I’m to give out the FA Cup that evening. Brilliant, that. She must have remembered my asking at my knighthood if she might be able to lift the ban and now I’m going to Wembley in Prince William’s place.”

“Banastre,” John sighed. “This is a prime example of why no one can stand you. Who even – how did you swing that?”

“Making a complete mockery of the organization that forced my first name into being a bad pun for half my life?” he smiled. “Persistence, luck, I suppose …”

“The beautiful thing in this is that Chelsea are favourites to win.”

“And that is why everyone hates you, John,” Ban said before his forced stone visage gave way to yet more laughter, “why can’t you just let me have this? Not important. Better than sitting through the whole pomp and ceremony of the day’s other nationally televised event.”

“Aamongst various Eton-types,” Effie commented under her breath.

“The worst,” Ban agreed. “The whole of it. I have no trouble admitting that my former classmates present at this table would all have gone Oxbridge regardless of their backgrounds, and it is fine, and it is good so. But I knew so many like me in my short time not quite being able to justify my own presence there further than my surname or my wardrobe, and what is that worth? To me or society as a whole – getting into an elite university chiefly because my parents had the funds to send me to public school? I got literally nothing from it.”

“No offence, Mr Tarleton, but as someone who will be able to vote in the next general election, I hate it when you say things that I might agree with,” Dembe said.
“Me too,” Zeinab concurred.

“No, no, I get that. I’m doing a correspondence course at present to make up the educational deficit I mightn’t have had had I lived at home and gone redbrick from the beginning. But all I will ever have going for me at Westminster is the occasional opportunity to remind the Eton kids that my year got one over on them every time we met. And Wembley. I get to go to Wembley whilst they all sit the afternoon in a stuffy church.”

“I’m going to the FA Cup Final, too,” Percy told his mother, adding with a smile, “something to be said for staying local.”

“Cheers.”

“Did you go to school around here, Percy?” Samuel asked.

“I read archelogy at Leicester, yes.”

“You are kidding,” John accused, questioning excitedly, “Were you there when they found Richard III?”

“It is why I spent most of my professional life working medial jobs in the service industry,” Percy shrugged. “Year-round fieldwork is hard to find. Now I drop corpses in carparks rather than discover them,” he said. Ban laughed hardily at this and Ellie fought the urge to. Effie was not certain if that was meant as a joke. “No, but really, it is something tragic how little funding there is for research.”

“But you are happy now, aren’t you?” Ellie pouted at her employee.

“More than I had ever imagined was possible,” he answered her, though his soft eyes fixed themselves on Effie.

The teens exchanged some oohing over this sentiment and fell into a song, “Effie and Percy, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes -”

“That is enough,” Percy cautioned sharply. Effie swallowed, wishing he hadn’t.

“Oh, come on, cuz’” Dembe laughed. “We were just -”

“Elizabeth doesn’t plan to have children,” Margaret Spinkels informed everyone, including her niece.

“It isn’t that I don’t want them, I just,” Effie rambled, “I just can’t carry to term.”

Effie watched John’s spirits visibly sink as Aunt Margaret took it upon herself to inform the Nantabas of the darkest parts of their now-shared family history. “My niece and my ward were once engaged to be married. They moved the wedding back a season when it became clear that Effie wouldn’t be able to fit into her dress come the summer, and when she lost the child in the seventh month, John called things off completely and hasn’t called his godfather and I since. It is good to see you’ve been getting on so well. Twins now, John?”

“Six months,” he replied, eyes fixed on his plate.

“How lovely for you,” Effie said, her tone not matching her smile.

“You were pregnant with his baby?” Zeinab spat, turning to Percy as though she hoped he understood something different from the exchange.

“It was before we met,” Effie said. Her boyfriend’s mother opened her mouth but Effie found she
was not contented to suffer another slight. “Mrs Nantaba, with every respect, I’m not trying to replace John with Percy. No love is the same. Maybe it was age, environment or literary influences, but with John there was, that is we were both so consumed by ideals that we became one another’s before finding ourselves. It was courtly love. He wrote me poetry and put me on a pedestal and as a teenager and young adult who always felt as though I was somehow lacking when I compared myself to the girls I was friends with and, maybe more crucially, the girls that I wasn’t, I thought we were perfect, for one another, at least. And maybe we were once, but we grew up, grew apart, I finished a double masters at university, took over my father’s paper and realised there was a lot more to me than the fact that I had a boyfriend. John graduated early, got out into the real world and realised it was so much more interesting, so much more promising than the poems he had until that point centred around a half-imagined, idealized version of the girl I once was. What is past is passed. With Percy,” she smiled, “it is real, modern, active and engaging. We don’t have to fantasise about being Shakespearean figures for our love to find its validity. It is there. It is us. We’ve happy with ourselves and with each other and don’t have things holding us up or holding us back. I’m sorry, truly, if you have a problem with my past, my friends, my family, or the fact that the two great loves of my life happen to be blood relatives, but frankly, those are your problems, not ours.”

“Samuel,” Margaret asked when the silence that followed threatened to become comfortable. “Did you manage to book three rooms at the Winstanley House?”

Chapter End Notes

… That was probably a one all draw. That acknowledged, I have to appease myself that this update didn’t come with the hype of say, the Liverpool v. Man United fixture from this past fall, i.e. for many, the first indication (how?) that José played bloody boring football. I guess the fanfic version of that would be if you were to have read what you just did only with the work being tagged as [Benjamin Tallmadge/George Washington] [anal fisting][dom/sub][Ben has a daddy kink ;)][author is sleep deprived] and if I were to take my literary efforts half as seriously as The Special One takes himself, but it wasn’t and I quite clearly don’t. So, we are good, right? Still let’s have a post-match press conference:

You know that quote from Lord Palmerston that we all had a good laugh over before the Abi? “The Schleswig-Holstein question is so complicated, only three men in Europe have ever understood it. One was Prince Albert, who is dead. The second was a German professor who became mad. I am the third and I have forgotten all about it.” The conflict isn’t really all that difficult to comprehend, but for whatever inexplicable reason people freak when trying to follow the cause-and-effect of the thing. Brexit is exactly the same way. Read any news article from literally any publication about the prospective withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union and I guarantee you’ll fully understand all the ins and outs of it. I have the distinct feeling that we as a news consuming public are only told otherwise because someone figured out it is a good way to sell papers. We will have to ask Effie …

Bayern München (Eng.: Bayern Munich) is inarguably the best football team in the Bundesliga, for now. The cannibalization that lead to their dominance will likely also lead to their downfall for all the reasons Simcoe states, but we won’t definitively know this for ten years or so. Will Franz Beckenbauer and Uli Hoeness still be kicking around by then? I mean ... probably. Though history is written long after everyone who
remembers it is dead (or has gone mad, or has forgotten it completely), there are certain things we witness where there exists little debate over what will one day be said …

… Things like **Leicester City** winning the 15/16 season!!! And in the weeks that followed, everyone in the world was a fan of The Foxes. (Remember that next time we meet Lafayette in H+S. ;) Here though, in Indefinite Articles, Reinette brought me on this particular bit of British history that rightly deserved a shout out.

She also reminded me of **Richard III** being found in a Leicester carpark hundreds of years after his defeat at the Battle of Bosworth Field (1483). He was the last king of the Plantagenet dynasty and the last English king to die in battle.

**The Wars of the Roses** were a series of civil wars between 1455-1485 and are from all that I’ve heard super, super complex, interesting, hard to understand (… maybe in the same understanding as Schleswig-Holstein or Brexit) but I will likely never know for sure, having been exposed at a young age to a series of extremely popular romance novels centred around the major players, thus finding out far too early in life that I am really not keen on political machinations being reduced to silly love stories and voiding any interest I might have otherwise had in this era of the English throne. If you know happen to know about it and think I ought to give it another shot, hit me up in the comments.

As always, thank you so much for reading!

Up next: ‘And now … back to this b---- who had a lot to say about me in the press last week – Maggie what’s good?’ XP
A Stage

Chapter Summary

Effie and Percy share a tender moment, John and Ban learn a little too much about Margaret, Samuel tries to smooth things over between his godson and the relationship he has to the past, photo albums get passed around after dessert and four former classmates tell the story of the time they took on Shakespeare.

Chapter Notes

You guys, I am so upset. As most of you are aware, my life pretty much revolves around news coverage and although none of that has changed in the past weeks, the most significant event in politics (and something like 3216th in entertainment) completely escaped my attention. My instinct is to blame the EU’s attempts at renegotiations after the US backed out of the Iran deal, the Mueller Investigation, the Royal Wedding, the selection of Die National Elf (and, of course, the inclusion of Gündogan and Özil) but like, I mean there is really no excuse for this one:

The 2018 Eurovision Song Contest has come and gone. In case you missed it too, Israel won, which we probably all could have predicted based on the current political climate – but have any of you heard the winning song on the radio? Have any of you even heard Germany’s entry (which apparently came in 4th???) In case you needed a reason to take up an interest in the debate over the Rundfunkbeitrag …

Tja. So that is this week in misusing a notes section. Do I actually have anything to say about this update? No, not really. I do however have a few potential warnings: there are a few flashbacks in this chapter that have to deal with death, survivor’s guilt and other forms of regret. Sexual fantasies play out in the form of mental hang ups, hard core pornography becomes temporary fodder for conversation, and everyone’s least favourite player has a sizable POV. War, plastic surgery, emo music and guyliner are also mentioned. There is a H+S spoiler, but you have to squint.

Still with me? Great! Then as always, I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Effie Gwillim was no stranger to falling into rabbit holes. This one, however, had yet to lead her to any wonderland worth mention. Fifteen minutes had since elapsed, and, although learning about Sheikh Sazeli, a widely ignored sixteenth century fatwa, Franz Kolschitzky and the Battle of Vienna was in fact interesting, Effie found that she was no closer to answering the question she had originally plugged into Google.

In her twenty-nine years of life, Effie Gwillim had never once made coffee. Admitting as much would be to surrender all of the gains she had made over supper. She did not like the beverage and did not herself drink it, but this seemed the sort of skill she ought well to have gained along the way. Normal people, she was half-certain, all knew how to combine ground beans and boiling water to
create a potion that would render its drinker capable of imitating a semblance of coconsciousness, but these so-said normal people, it seemed, did not spend their time posting anything useful to the internet.

YouTube was even less help than Wikipedia and countless lifestyle blogs had been. After finding and watching a three-minute video of Marie and her friend Susan making Almond-Milk-Macchiatos a la Starbucks on a stovetop (something that apparently required a pan and a metal whisk) Effie felt ready to surrender. She let the next video play without protest or further searching and wished she was instead being asked to apply winged eyeliner whilst of public transit – these instructions were easy enough to follow.

“You need any help?” Percy asked over the sound of running water. The two had escaped their friends and relatives and had since turned the sizable kitchen into a secret kingdom by clearing the table after supper had ended, promising to do the dishes and to return with tea and coffee. Though the Nantaba kitchen was equipped with a dishwasher, Percy had decided to do all of the work by hand, buying them more time away from the chaos that was the meeting of their two families and the sibling they sort-of shared. They had been in their hide-away for a half-hour if the clock on the wall kept correct time, slowly but surely, the pile of plates was waning and they would soon run out of excuses the dishes provided. Embarrassed as she was by her own lack of practical knowledge, Effie found herself wishing that tea provided the same struggles as coffee had shown it could.

“I have never done this before,” she said in a small voice. “I know even just saying that makes me seem like a spoilt brat, but I -”

“Hey, hey,” Percy tried to soothe her, “No one thinks that.”

“Yes, they do.”

Percy simply laughed and shook his head. “You offered to do the dishes, you tried all of the food on offer, you have been nothing but polite, even in sticking up for yourself – Effie, no one cares if you’ve never made coffee before. Why should you? You don’t even like the stuff. Here,” he hugged her from behind, taking the phone from her hand and replacing it with a small spoon. “Fill this here four times with grounds and put them in the filter. Then fill up the cannister with water, pour the water in here, place the cannister back under the filter and turn the machine on with this button.” Effie smiled. Anyone else would have sounded patronizing giving such instructions but Percy Nantaba was incapable of condescension. He continued to hold her as she preformed the task and Effie felt at home and at ease in his embrace. She stood only to the middle of his chest but imagined their bodies had been made for each other’s - the belly that caused him some measure of embarrassment met perfectly with the curve of her spine, her ears were easily positioned to hear the heart that beat for her within his broad chest. She felt adored, that she could well have stood in the warm, gentle hold of the giant whom she found more and more gorgeous every time the eyes met. Percy bent his neck and found her lips with his. Effie whispered honeyed words that made him smile and spin her around to face him.

She remembered the first time she had ever truly found herself in the company of the man she had come to love. They had been on another family holiday in a loose sense, Effie flying first class from London to New York to cover Edmund Hewlett’s wedding to Anna Strong the had captured public imagination on both sides of the Atlantic. Not hers.

At that point in her life, Effie Gwillim had ever reason to believe that she may never smile again. She had gotten news days before that one of her closest friends had died of heart complications that had first arisen years after the operation that had saved his life. She could not believe a small clot more
capable than bombs and bullets, nor could she collapse into the tears that threatened to overtake her, demanding an explanation from the Lord God as to why this friend had died so young and why he had been forced to live so long after there had been enough of him left to mourn and miss had it be his ultimate fate to fall from the shot six full years after it had been fired. Effie could not do these things because of those relying on her to be strong where they found themselves fall short of the task. She had to be sensible. She had to find a way to ask the questions that no one seemed willing to answer under the guise of covering an aristocrat’s marriage to an American that would see him surrender his place in the line of crown succession. In a few short hours after take-off, Effie would be in same room of everyone Ellie had named as potential victims of her vengeance. Percy had seemed to her at the time little more than a loaded gun. Before the plane found its way to the runway, Effie began to cry.

Her weekend-bodyguard wordlessly handed her a handkerchief. He sat across from her, fully taking up both sets Ellie had booked him. Effie studied Percy intently, wondering exactly what orders he had been given that extended beyond her immediate protection. For his part, Percy Nantaba seemed loath to look at her. At first, Effie assumed he was working, his eyes dancing around the cabin in search of potential threats to her safety. To her surprise, interest and light disappointment, he produced a book from his carry-on luggage when the fasten seatbelt light was switched off and pretended to be taken with the words of James Joyce for far too long to seem convincing to even the most casual of observers.

Effie broke their silence by explaining to him that the book was a terrible choice, his eyes met hers as she offered a critique of his cover. He politely countered by discussing plot, causing Effie to then fall into an impossibly awkward apology that came out as more of an insult in her manner of speech, which Percy in turn was good enough to laugh off. After offering her pick of a few of the magazines he had also picked up at the airport kiosk, after he had returned to his own reading, Effie saw in his concentration someone she recognised. They were about to attend her wedding, she informed him. At the insistence of her young neighbour, she had sent Anna Strong the wedding dress she had never gotten to wear and the bridesmaid dresses her closest friends had been denied. She mentioned this, anticipating that she would once again find herself face to face with her would be groom, a man whom Percy reminded her of at certain angles and in certain expressions. She had not noticed it before, initially being so taken with the size which Percy claimed ironically kept him invisible.

Effie continued to observe him in chaste glances that embarrassed her into impure thoughts as the hours passed. She pictured herself taking him - for she would need to be on top - provided she was still physically capable of providing him with pleasures she had too long denied herself. She hadn’t been naked with anyone since a failed pregnancy had left her skin stretched and scarred, causing her to wonder if it would be better to ride this sizable stallion in reverse, if he would be more out off by the stomach she was beginning to doubt would ever again be quite as taunt as it once was or the tattoo she had put her lower back whilst attending university, if she would be too tight as the result of all of the yoga that had been forced upon her by well meaning friends, if she herself was a bad friend for entertaining such fantasies around Ellie’s employee. She had tried to shrug off the thoughts.

Effie, seeing this, asked if there was anything he could do to make her more comfortable, apologising for the length of his legs. When Effie shifted to rest hers on the space beside him, he massaged both of her feet at once, his huge, callused hands formed perfectly to the task. He told her a bit about his life, the world outside of the one he worked in and she had been born into. She told him she saw him. She instead meant that she saw through him, the coming days proving all of the theories she had formed about her travel companion correct.

Sometimes, she still hated that Percy and John had been born as brothers. She hated that Ellie had taken this particular opportunity to extract blood from the people she then perceived to be her enemies and that she had done so in the Gwillim name. Even in the chaos of what seemed now a different age altogether, Effie recalled her heart breaking for Percy, for whom half a lifetime of
research had been let down in the form of John. She had felt the same way at dinner, but here, in his arms, all she felt was love. She fluttered a few fantasies aloud around what they would do in his childhood bedroom when they retired for the evening, causing Percy to blink, blush and ask if she did not instead wish to take her aunt up on the offer of a hotel room.

“I’ll be quiet,” she promised.

“Where is the fun in that?” he grinned, “For me, I mean.”

“We are not going anywhere,” she told him coquettishly, breaking away from his embrace loath as she was to do so in order to dry the remaining dishes with a tea towel still moist from all of the others in the set. “This is closer to how I imagined it being. A weekend away with your family. What we have now.”

“It is better than I had anticipated,” Percy admitted. “Ordinarily my mum would be in here, telling us where everything went as though I did not live here for twenty-two years.”

Even with the kitchen door closed, they could hear Margaret and Zeinab comparing baby pictures and trying to lure one another back into an open competition which, for what it was worth, they both seemed to immensely enjoy.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Effie said.

“Oh, you would be surprised at how much a small woman can manage to push one around.”

“Am I not living up to expectations then?” she asked teasingly, rising to her tip-toes.

“My Dear, nothing in this world could have prepared me for you.”

He leaned over to kiss her but stopped short. They heard the front door open, a sigh following the silence of waiting for their world to be interrupted. “I’m worried Ban has his laptop on him,” Effie said. “That he is trying to make good with my aunt by giving her more fodder for her cannons. If I am right, I am never leaving this kitchen and neither are you.”

“Why is that?”

“He never posts like anything to Insta or Facebook but keeps every picture he has ever taken on his computer, some sort of secret gesture of sentimentality. I only know this because I can always call on him when I need one kind of anachronism or another to accompany an article. Still, I didn’t sign up for you to see me at the stages of my life I would best like to forget before I’ve had a chance to see you in your ballet slippers,” Effie gave a small pout.

“I’m not sure how to respond,” Percy mocked. “I really don’t know how to break this to you Effie, but I should doubt that anyone needs to see a picture of you trying desperately to look miserable at a music festival to guess that you went through an emo stage when that was a thing.”

“Is that so?”

“I dare say.”

“Well in that case, let me defend myself by stating that anyone who thinks misery has to be staged at such a venue clearly has not had the experience of eating canned ravioli for three days straight.”

“So you can cook? Good to know,” Percy teased as Effie took to whipping at him with her towel.
“Cook. And Clean. And defend myself against anyone who claims otherwise,” she laughed. Ignoring the attacks she felt herself engaging in with increasing earnest, he picked her up and kissed her deeply despite her initial protests. She felt she could live in the embrace forever and felt sure that at least part of her would forevermore.

They were dancing.

John watched as his younger brother spun the girl they had shared at different stages and found himself unable to speak. Effie was delighted, but she was secondary in the scene that John saw unfolding before him. He considered that it was possible that Percy loved without want or expectation, that he was capable of such an ideal because he had from a young age that which John had spent a lifetime longing for.

He had spent the better part of the past forty minutes watching on as Zeinab bombarded Margaret with photographs, the latter countering each one with her own forced display of pride, telling outright lies and cooling considerably as John offered corrections. Effie, he informed the Nantabas, was never the editor of the school paper as they did not have one and he had lost out on the captaincy of the football team to Ban Tarleton. He had had the most assists one season, not the most goals and Effie’s water colours had at one point been hung in a local pizzeria, not in the York Art Gallery.

Although he had no reason to assume that Zeinab’s recollections of Percy’s childhood bore any more resemblance to the truth than Margaret’s, even with photographic evidence to argue her case, he felt his envy grow with every word. Seeing in silence the man his biological brother had grown into, John was certain of his suspicions. Percy was better liked, better loved, and would have been had they grown up in the same household, had their parents survived. They might well have done, he mused, were only his nature closer to his brother’s.

Percy had been born premature. He had not broken any pelvic bones by coming into this world, had not effectively ended any lives by beginning his. Had John only been as eager in infancy, his mother would live and love. She would have returned to Britain and to the stage and his father would surely have had enough reason to follow, he wouldn’t have died in Pakistan because he would not have stayed. John had only known commandry late in his youth, and then only through structured activities. Had he grown up with a brother, he reasoned now as he always had - partially the result of his father’s devastation over the loss of a second son he had never known, the result of his mother abandoning them both after the fact - surely, he would have been better set to meet the world and its struggles. Surely, the stories Margaret now south to tell about him would have been true – he would have played a more attacking role in the midfield and he would have been made captain for he would have been able to connect to the same charisma that came so naturally to the Tarletons, Hewletts, Burges’, Khans and every other large family he could cite from his schooldays. Such alluded him still.

Somehow, it felt all his fault. He cleared his throat.

“I hate to interrupt,” he said. Effie shot him a dark glare though his sentiment was meant.

“We are almost finished here,” Percy assured him.

“It isn’t that … there has been an accident, I’m afraid,” John informed them. “I didn’t want to trouble your parents with this. Ban dropped a saucer and is bleeding out, it isn’t particularly deep but it
should still be tended to.”

“My mother’s china?” Percy’s eyes widened. “Shit … okay, I’ll get a band-aid from the medicine cabinet for Ban and there must be a manufacture’s stamp on the set, we might be able to find a replacement -”

“Or we could fix it,” Effie offered. “How many times do you think I’ve had to do the same with my aunt’s collectables? I’m not half the angel I’m sure she is making me out to be.”

They had purchased the cake from a baker in Soho who prided herself on ‘locally sourced sustainability’, whatever that should be taken to mean. Ban Tarleton was on the mind that this overpriced, organic creation that seemed as much a bouquet as a three-tiered cake ought to at least last until Easter given the excessive use of vaguely synonymous buzzwords fed into the description and had been mildly amused by the idea of demanding his money back should the pastry not live up to its lofty expectations when he set it before his relatives as a way of marking the resurrection of Christ. Thirty-five minutes after announcing that she was going to retrieve the condescending confection from the boot of the car, Ban began to question if he daughter did not share his private designs on testing just what ‘sustainability’ meant in the sense of a pastry. Excusing himself from a conversation with his fellow former officers which he had been stuck in since his arrival, he parted the living room curtain to glimpse Marie pacing at the end of the driveway, talking on the phone at well past what had been her bedtime for the better part of her short life.

“John?” he beckoned. Simcoe glanced over to him with the nerve to show his annoyance. He was still shite at social gatherings, electing to stand in some corner with a glass he would occasionally touch his lips to but never empty enough to prompt anyone to offer him a refill, rather than engage, or be engaged, in anything that qualified human interaction insofar as he could help it. Ban Tarleton, who had suffered Simcoe’s shun for two years at boarding school before breaking the latter’s silent resolve was simply not having it tonight. He had again played the fool everyone was want to cast him as at dinner at John’s request. As he saw it, he now had a favour to call in.

Simcoe raised his pale eyebrows rather than reduce himself to giving a verbal response, presenting Ban the opportunity the exercise the more refined bits of his personal lexicon by mouthing the sorts of slurs he would not say aloud in present company. This had the desired effect of hastening his sometimes-friend to his side. The MP greeted him with a parted grin.

“That is a very rude thing to say,” Simcoe informed him, clearly unamused.

“I take it, hearing aid aside, that you can still read lips?”

“I take it you are still a racist prick?”

“Oh, would you come off of it?” Ban dismissed. “I’m trying to give you an opportunity to repay your debt.”

“I’m sorry, my ‘debt’?” Simcoe sneered.

“For my playing along with your whole attempt at charade earlier. Look, I just want to know what my daughter is saying. Whom she is talking to. Can you -”

“Spy?” Simcoe interrupted.
“If that is how you want to phrase it.”

“That feels an invasion of privacy.”

“You’ll understand when your girls are older,” Ban shrugged. “Or maybe you won’t. Hopefully, they will never give you reason to.”

“I don’t think -”

“She ran away before. Two years ago. I just worry -”

John held up his finger to silence him and stared out the window intently before speaking in a high voice Ban wished for his friend’s sake was pure imitation.

“It is kinda … whatever. I’ll probably be in Toxteth by tomorrow afternoon and we can meet at the pier if you get the ferry in the morning, but mate, seriously, if you can’t figure out how to amuse yourself in Dublin I hate to say it but Liverpool doesn’t have much to recommend itself,” he translated. “No, I’m not in London. - What? - No. Leicester. I didn’t post it to Insta yet, but our car broke down and one of my step-mum’s associates who lives in the area came out to give us a jump. I hooked up the cables. – Yeah. – No. We are there at his house now. His parents house. – No. – So the name probably won’t mean shit to you but do you know who Margaret Spinkels is? – Uh huh.” John sighed. “This sounds nefarious,” he commented with audible sarcasm. “Am I done?”

“What is she planning on doing tomorrow?” Ban demanded.

John watched for a seemingly long while before summarising, “Whatever it is she has acknowledged that she will need to ask you first, that you will probably say no, she isn’t sure if Billy will want to come but she can probably talk him into it, and she has a new friend from Belfast who whomsoever she is talking to simply has to meet … not that he gets on with anyone. Umm. Not going to repeat that.”

“What?”

“A naughty word.”

“How naughty? Rather, naughty in what sense -”

“Oh – that is about the gist of it,” John remarked as Marie showed them both the finger and continued her conversation with her back turned.

“I’m sorry, she is going through a rough time,” Ban tried to explain. “I’m certain you weren’t the intended target of that gesture.”

“So am I,” John smirked. “Are we done?”

“We are. I’ve to go put a stop to this.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Margaret Spinkels informed him. Her turned to find her standing directly behind him, causing him to break into gooseflesh.

“Ma’am you don’t understand,” he stammered. “I have a fairly good idea to whom my daughter is speaking and it is not the sort of association I feel is entirely appropriate.”

“Is this the kid from her school she wants to go to a dance with,” Ms Spinkels pried.

“The same,” Ban stated simply.
“Having only one side of this conversation to go by, I think it is entirely possibly that they really are just friends.”

“They’ve snogged a few times.”

“And?” Ms Spinkels questioned.

Feeling rather ill, Ban countered with his own. “Do you recall what I was like when I was a teenager?”

“I should doubt that anyone will ever forget,” Ms Spinkels admitted. John snorted back a laugh.

“This kid, he is like *that*, only terribly, terribly daft about it and terribly dull otherwise. You have to understand, I met him first in an entirely different context to him being my daughter’s school mate.”

“Given your political platform, do you still have Headhunters coming after you?” John guessed, squinting.

“Needs must,” Ban answered with a forced nonchalance. “Getting punched by a neo-Nazi is enough to earn one a place in the political pantheon.”

“Is that what got you knighted?” John mocked.

“Officially I was honoured for exemplary service to the United Kingdom but being that I’m forbidden from discussing exactly what this entails, we will suffice it to say that I earned my title by making fun of LFC … which is true, in a roundabout way,” he considered.

“Bullshit that you were honoured over those more deserving.”

“Ferguson declined on republican grounds, Hewlett got to keep a much more valuable title, and, being that were it not for me you would all be in prison I rather think,” he shifted, determined to avoid escalation. “I think I need to go speak to my daughter. If you’ll both be so kind as to excuse me.”

“No,” Ms Spinkels again blocked his way. “Marie needs this. You don’t want to get to a place where she makes plans without thinking to ask. Give her a few minutes more. When she comes in, apologise, ask her if everything is alright and if what she wants to do with her friends and cousins is within reason.”

“Its not,” Ban stated sharply. “That I can guarantee. Arthur isn’t a hooligan, he isn’t interesting enough to put that kind of effort forward, he is just the sort of kid who gets his jollies form constant condensation and being that one of my first encounters with him was bailing him out after watching him trying to illegally purchase alcohol for a porn star in a seedy hotel at around ten in the morning – I’d rather say my judgement here is sound.”

“What were you doing at a seedy hotel at ten o’clock in the morning?” Ms Spinkels raised her eyebrows.

“Hewlett wedding,” he replied flatly.

“Wherever this is going,” John seemed to warn.

“O’rite,” Ban continued out of growing spite, “so Effs and I were both staying at the Albany Holiday Inn few years back, so I do have someone present to back me up should the validity of what I am about to relay be called into question.”
Ms Spinkels nodded. John sighed.

“The embassy had me sharing a room with a kid over on work experience,” Ban explained, “every fifteen, sixteen-year-old in the nation with the means to do so tries for a spot in the US that they can get their driving licence that much sooner. Any road, this lad had little interest. Our ambassador at that time to the United States was, and I suppose still is, an avid motor fan. I was under a form of house arrest and the kid is some kind of landed noble, so we all drive up together - rather, I drove, Cornwallis, in the one worthwhile thing he ever did state-side - teaching me how to operate an automatic with a right-side driver’s seat. It was glorious, truly. Wellesley, meanwhile, contented himself to the back seat where he kept incessantly texting his girlfriend Kitty, whom I swear to this day doesn’t exist. But that is neither here nor there. Every time we stopped for petrol or to stretch our legs or for any reason whatsoever, we asked if he’d like a go of it, no, no – she might yet text him back. Suffice it to say that by the time we reach our hotel I was at my wits end and before falling to sleep, I gave him a few tips that have worked for me in the past and thought nothing else of it. The next day, he was meant to decorate an Irish pub where the reception was to take place, I by chance, glanced out the window long after I supposed him to have gone to see out the easiest internship in the history of the practice, and there he was, in the carpark, chatting up an adult actress.”

“Who?” Ms Spinkels asked.

“I’m sure you’d not be familiar with her work,” Simcoe cut in.

“Her screen name is Lady Lola?” Ban tried.

“BDSM then?” Ms Spinkels mused. “There is an argument to be made that the internet has desensitised the younger generation. My own tastes weren’t quite so broad until my mid-twenties.”

“Christ! Fuck me, ay!”

“Ms. Spinkels, I could well have gone my whole life without knowing that about you.”

“Likewise, but we are all adults here, Banastre, John,” her eyes narrowed.

“Yea … um,” Ban swallowed, continuing quickly without meeting the eyes of a woman who had a way of making him feel like a small and very disobedient child, even and perhaps especially when she called him and adult. “Knowing nothing good could come of this, I hastened down to the lobby where I saw him trying to buy her a bottle of the finest wine on the house, which I believe was of the five-dollar variety. How Lola sat there with a straight face I’ll never know, it was a statement of professionalism if I’ve ever seen one. The bartender, rather, the receptionist manning the bar, asked to see his ID. He gave her a fake, a good one, I’ll give him that, and correctly provided his name and address as asked. And then she wanted to know his licence number.”

“And he messed it up?” John asked.

“No! The little tit recited it perfectly. No one fucking knows their licence number, which is exactly what I told him when I re-confiscated it from the Holiday Inn staff using the ID badge given to me by the embassy. And do you know how he chose to thank me? He told me to go decorate the pub in his place! Lola told him to give her a call when he was older and gave him a small kiss – which thankfully, Effie managed to get on camera. In the off chance that he does become a colleague of mine one day I’d happily have him suffer a Stormy-Daniels-type scandal. This was all before I knew he and my daughter were friends. Two years is a huge difference at that age and I’d rather she not spend her time snogging some loser kid with a Euro-mullet who macks on porn stars he shouldn’t have even heard of whilst either lying about having a girlfriend in Ireland or legitimately being the worst boyfriend in the world. No. Marie is better than that on every level and I hope she sees herself
as such."

“If he says she is in Ireland it is obviously fake,” John echoed his sentiments.

“If she is having a good time I don’t see the problem,” Ms Spinkels countered.

“If it was Effie?” Ban challenged.

“You have no say at that age. None. You are going to hurt your case the more you try to make one for yourself. Don’t you remember what you were like when you were a boy?”

“I remember exactly, which is half the reason why .”

“No, I don’t think you do. You were far sweeter, far, far more sensitive than you now care to admit or acknowledge. There is evidence to that all around you. Do you think for a moment that anyone here isn’t luckier to have had you in their lives at the age your daughter is now?”

“I’m out,” John attempted to excuse himself.

“No, you’re not, John,” Margaret commanded. “Why do you find it so difficult to confess to other people’s admirable qualities? It is the same way with Percy, with Effie,” she spat.

“Is it enough to confess that I had proper tutorage in that department?” he returned with a sneer.

“Oi, come off it, mate.”

“Fine. Ban … your ‘o’rite’ or however it is you’d like it put. At times, that is. Ms. Spinkels,” he gave himself room to exit with a nod.

“I don’t know where I went wrong,” the woman murmured when he turned his back, holding her hand before her lips to disguise expression or conceal her inner doubts.

“I don’t know that one could have turned that out into a right,” Ban replied. “I tried. We all did. We all do. John has been nothing but this constant fucking ulcer since the day when first I met him and still he gets invited to dinner .”

“Which you daughter cooked,” Ms Spinkels interrupted.

“Aye?” Ban questioned.

“She is rather like you, I think, in that respect. Look at how quick was to befriend Dembe. You know, I think your problem is you are given to believing the worst things people say about you, you aren’t half as bad as your enemies think.”

“But?”

“But you need to let Marie go off with her little friends tomorrow. She needs them right now every bit as much as she needs you.”

“You know what it is to be responsible for a teenage girl -”

“And as such I know that she is bound to do what she will regardless of whatever limits you try to set. There are times I think I could have done more to prevent John and Effie from hurting one another had I not made myself a shared enemy. Now look at them. Unwilling to come home for Easter, unable to treat one another with civility and respect under a roof that isn’t theirs.”
“You might offer a common foe as you say,” he suggested.

“How quick you are,” she winked. “If you’ll be so good as to excuse me.”

Ban took a final look out the window. Marie had, it seemed managed to hang up the phone and was in the process of removing the cake from the boot of the car. Smiling lightly, he turned back to the party, intending to return to the Admiral, the brothers Nantaba and the familiarity to be found in their company and conversation. Instead, the sight of John Graves Simcoe struggling with silverware.

“Need a hand?” he offered.

“Being as you’ve only one to offer?” John quipped.

“I don’t miss it,” Ban said, glancing down at the crippled remains of what had been.

“How can you not?” John inquired after considering the sentiment for some time.

“Are you asking in earnest?” he returned.

“If you are stating in such terms.”

“It is a long story, and one I’m personally not keen to share.”

John nodded with some offer of understanding. “It can’t be worse that what we learned about Ms Spinkels,” he muttered, forming his mouth into a slight grin.

“You mean … Ms Spankels?” Ban winked, watching the humour fade from his former classmate’s face.

“That we are clear, this is why we never hang out,” John said flatly.

“Please, it wounds you that you didn’t come up with that.”

“It does,” John admitted, “and when I relay the story to Edmund I’ll be sure to do so in your precise nomenclature.”

“Why would you do that to him? Honestly, what are you so goddamn angry about all the time?” Ban demanded, dropping the saucer he was holding. “Shit.” That the skin on his hand was broken as well he noticed first when drops of blood joined the shattered china on the table top.

“Sit down, let me have a look,” John commanded.

Ban shrugged in so far as he could after a physical altercation the two had been in years prior. “It is fine,” he said as he tried to fit the pieces back together. “I’m just worried about -”

“Sit down. We will tend to the dish in a moment. Let me have a look.”

“Are you suddenly a medical expert?” Ban slighted.

“I have a toddler.”

“Fair argument.”
John frowned. “Stay here, I will be right back. Here, press it like this,” he instructed, wrapping Ban’s good hand around the cut.

Having sustained significant nerve damage to what remained of his prehensile forelimb, he did his best to obey, not feeling the wound and only half noting the pressure John insisted be applied to it. Enough time had passed that Ban could by and large ignore his impairment save for the rare incidences that reminded him of its inconvenience, but there were far worse things in this world as the hand he had mostly lost might attest to.

Whenever he thought on it, the first image that flooded to his mind was of his right hand raw and broken against the handle of a shovel he had once held under the setting desert sun. In the dark, his sweat would cause him chills and he would fall sick by morning, but he had to finish what he had started by refusing to fire. He had been nineteen, at the point a mere six months in Iraq, spending what little free time he had found for himself playing in pick-up matches with a handful of his fellow under-officers and the local children who attended a yet-unfinished school within their camp. When he was told to shoot one of their number while on duty, his fingers froze in hesitation. Seconds later, the boy he had previously thought himself to have befriended was dead, taking all seventeen of his classmates with him.

The most of them had been orphans. No one else would mourn their loss or spend midnights that had grown countless in their multitude lying awake to tally all the ways they had been failed by the occupation. The school was never completed. The graves were the least he could have done. It had been he who had filled them, after all.

For a long while thereafter, Ban found that he had no trouble following orders to their furthest extent. He ceased feeling and his correspondence suffered; left with little to say for himself, he had stopped writing home, save for when he received a promotion in rank for reeking hell and havoc on the people he had come to protect. One day, he was invited to join in a war council with a number of greying men who far outranked him, an insider obscured by a veil and a man he recognised from Edinburgh, leading him to identify the black clad figure behind him instantly. He left the meeting with the feeling that he had no friends left to speak of and that he would very much like to join the boys and girls he had buried. Instead, he continued to find that all of the qualities and capabilities that had eluded him as a civilian remained omnipresent on the battlefield. Ban Tarleton, who had spent the better part of his life being mediocre at best in all other ventures happened to be rather skilled at capturing enemy strongholds and laying to waste all who stood in his way. The bets that had always seen him come up short became their own sort of luck abroad; for all the effort he put into finding his way to Valhalla, he survived to see himself promoted further up the ranks until one day fortune chose to revoke her favour.

He only had the vaguest memories of riding back to base with the American commander of what had otherwise been a successful mission. He had wanted to tell him something to relay to the people he had once been close to but the general would hear none of it. He closed his eyes and had been slapped for doing so, forced instead to return to an idealized home while gazing at the inside roof of a Humvee. “Is it still a love story if the ending’s a sad one?” he asked.

When was seven years old, he kissed a girl for the first time and instantly regretted doing so. She was visiting with her parents and siblings and had had as much interest in exchanging insincere pleasantries as he himself, and upon this discovery had taken him up on whatever form of competition he thought to put on offer, until, within the hour the two were playing. They spent the whole day running amuck, sharing small things they felt quantified as secrets and found themselves curious at yet content in the discovery that their company was something that could be considered desirable. He had four older siblings who seldom wanted to let him play, telling him he was annoying, to stop talking, to go away, as well as two younger ones, whom his mother always told
him not to be so rough with, regardless of what he had done to warrant such sentiment. Ellie, in turn,
was a twin which made her only half so interesting as a child would otherwise be, or so she said. Her
other brother was a genius and her sister would be a duchess one day, and she would, too, but it
would be far less impressive because Edna was of course older and would therefore have done it
first. He had not really understood the specifics but related all the same. When he spoke, she looked
at him with wide eyes and asked to know what happened next or answered ‘nuh-uh’ and began to
race before he even said go. She had been meant to stay in the room of one of his sisters, but they
had begged his parents to let her stay with him instead so they could play a while longer. She fell
asleep first. Considering that she was really quite lovely and that this was the sort of thing one was
meant to do in such situations, he kissed her cheek before turning over with the ill feeling that he had
made a catastrophic mistake. Shamed before his father, he sought his oldest brother’s council the next
morning and, after telling him what he had done, asked if this meant Ellie was his girlfriend now.
William laughed and he began to cry that if she was in fact his girlfriend, they might break up one
day and then she wouldn’t be his friend anymore.

Though they never dated in all the years to follow, he had asked her to marry him and they had not
spoken since. “Is it still a love story if the ending’s a sad one?” he asked. Arnold had told him that his
story was not yet over, and, as it happened, he was right.

Recovery had taken a long while.

Sometimes his wounds seemed a form of atonement until he remembered the children whose lives he
might have saved had he been able to shoot when such was asked of him. He wondered what would
be come of him now that he had surrendered the only thing he had ever truly been good at, worried
that he frightened his girlfriend’s daughter when his demons wouldn’t let him rest. Once, when
Marie was still quite small, she found him in the living room with a bottle of Scotch he had struggle
to open after struggling for a great deal longer not to and had tried to take a sip. Ban snatched the cup
from her and she asked if he could get he some juice. She was thirsty and could not reach it. He
complied and brought her back to her room, reading her a story to help return her to sleep. In the
weeks to come she asked him to read to her more and more until one day she stopped him
midsentence to ask him if he was her father. No. She asked if she could call him dad all the same.
His relationship with Mary began improving as well and for the first time in years he had the feeling
that she was not simply with him as penance for the men who had replaced him while he was
stationed overseas. For a long while thereafter, the three had been a happy family and he still
considered that his life might well have continued along that trajectory had her unexpected illness not
forced him back into active service quite so soon. But such was life. His had been one many others
would envy, and he could not mourn the loss of his hand or envy the abilities he had lost along with
it.

“Dad?” Marie asked. “Shit, are you alright?”

He smiled and reminded her of her manners. Accidents happened. He told her then that he loved her,
that he was sorry for having ease dropped and that he was so proud of the young woman she was
growing into. “Oh my God. Stop,” Marie moaned as she unboxed the cake. “I don’t know if you
realise this but you are so dramatic every time you get hurt.”

“Am I?”

“Is that exclusive to injury?” John asked as he reappeared at the table. “I found help,” he told him,
lifting a bandage and a bundle of gauze.

“Let me see it, I have nail glue,” Effie announced.
“What do you plan to do to me?” Ban demanded.

“Not you, hush,” Effie dismissed. “I plan to save Ms Nantaba’s china from your general clumsiness.”

“Thank you,” she leaned in to whisper when her work was through. “Maybe she will like me now.”

“Are the two of you … related?” Zeinab squinted as her head turned between Effie and Ban.

“Yes and no, but mostly yes,” Ban answered without answering in the manner that likely benefited him in politics and drove judges, solicitors and court reporters mad when he was asked to testify for one reason or another. “We have the same blood type so we’ve both donated for one another on occasion,” he clarified to his hostess’ approval and Effie’s sudden annoyance.

“Good to know I’ve you to blame then for all of my many greys,” she stuck out her tongue.

“I’d personally attribute that just to being in Banastre’s presence for extended periods,” John smarted.

“And here I though you both were being nice to me!” the MP whined, raising his single hand to his chest in an act of undue theatrics. “Darling,” he turned to his wife, “Am I going grey? Am I aging poorly?” he pouted. John Graves Simcoe took some amusement in the answer to both of these questions being ‘yes’, at least in comparison to himself. His former dorm mate had always been considered conventionally handsome, and though he supposed this was still true, his years were beginning to show in peppered hair and laughter lines that continued to crease the corners of his eyes when his smile faded. But then, John considered, contentment had always come to Ban Tarleton with far greater ease than it was given to approaching him. He looked around the room. Everyone, or so it now appeared, had laid down their arms with ataraxic ease. Focusing on Percy who paid him no mind, he considered for a moment that there was something to Ban’s sentiment though his reasoning was too simplistic. He and Effie were related in a way that John would never know with his own brother. They had grown up together. They shared an understanding as such that was far more complex than plasma and platelets. In that thought he understood Margaret’s show of protection and felt further from home for his extended act of self-alienation.

“Quite,” Ellie purred as she ran her fingers up the back of her husband’s neck to his hairline. She lowered her octane to mimic a whisper meant for all to hear, “but ‘poorly’ only because you are being such a little bitch about it.”

“Relax, Effs, I got you. I’ve some Alpecin Tuning Cream somewhere in my luggage, if you want I can have Marie go out to the car to get it. She can ring her little friend back while she is out there and let him know that its okay, they can meet up so long as she and her cousins are back before supper.”

“Really?” Marie smiled.

Ban nodded, clearly not trusting his decision enough to give a verbal reply. Margaret smiled approvingly in a manner that again served to inform John that he would never again be able to watch porn on his phone in the tube during his morning commute like a normal human being. Glancing back to the other man cursed with this knowledge, he gathered that the sentiment was shared. He purposefully avoided meeting his godfather’s eyes as he had since the epiphany. It explained so much. Too much. He suddenly found himself grateful that his experience and understanding of family had nothing to do with the water of the womb.
“I’m good,” Effie answered. “I was going to make an appointment with my hairdresser prior to coming but I didn’t want to leave Mrs Nantabas’ pillow cases stinking of chemistry. I’m none to keen on having her sheets smell of – sorry, not to tangent, but why do men’s cosmetic products always come scented as ‘tobacco’ or ‘whiskey’ or ‘motor oil’ – things that make you choke? Don’t you as a near half of the human population agree that flowers smell nice? Why wouldn’t you want your soaps and shampoos -”

“Oh, I can offer you some of that as well,” Ban winked.

“They always did this back at school, too,” John informed the Nantabas.

“We share the same natural hair texture and neither of us can much tolerate the sun without a sizable dosage of SPF 65 which they don’t sell in most stores, a lot of swapping went on,” Effie explained.

“And yet you refused to do my makeup for the school play,” Ban shook his head.

“Don’t,” John warned, extending his leg to kick him but finding Dembe’s instead. The girl gave him a curious, annoyed look causing John to slouch.

“Posture,” Margaret reminded him instantly. Everyone at the table sat up a bit straighter, excepting Ellie who, like her siblings, was physically incapable of relaxing her shoulders and as such served as a constant check in her posh, poised pretention.

“I would argue that is what family is. People who care for one another regardless of what their blood relation might or mightn’t be,” Margaret quipped at the woman seated opposite herself.

“I don’t … really no how to say this,” the petit Asian countered, “Percy was … adopted,” she said slowly as though she were telling a delicate secret. Samuel Graves broke into a lighter Zeinab and the menfolk were quick to match. Margaret seemed to fight the urge. John did not share it. The conversation turned slightly from his brother to the mother they had briefly shared, causing John to again feel the full weight of the anger he carried towards her. There was something unjust in the fact that Percy had memories of dance recitals in relation to the woman. He had never gotten the chance to know her, and had he, John doubted that he would have been able to share in her passions. Having stolen her first love from her in birth, the woman John had known had little left in her heart for him and his father. Losing Percy had taken what little was left. Dessert finished, John thanked the Tarletons for the cake, his ex for the coffee, and made a move to excuse himself for a fag as Zeinab rose to retrieve another photo album.

John wondered if it would have been easier to move on with his life had he been allowed to continue with the knowledge that his mother had lost Percy due to a complication as opposed to abandoning him to a death kinder than any life she felt capable of bestowing. He wondered still if he himself had been born too soon, if they might have both been able to share in the connection that John could not find.

He stepped out into the night. Producing a Bic from his pocket, the fantasy of running around the wooden floor of a dance studio with his younger brother whilst their mother tried to get them to practice, convincing them of the merits of discipline when she proved that she could fly and promised they would as well to their absolute delight, went up in flames when he lit the end of his cigarette. “You too I beg, make not your anger manifest, For all that lives needs help from all the rest,” he recited to himself, seeking peace in poetry as he was given to.
Ashing into the tray on the back-porch table, yet to place the shameful act to any of the Nantabas, he found he was not alone. His eyes followed the other cigarette to his godfather’s face and he apologised. Even wearing a device, he could not always hear or detect sounds from outside his immediate field of vision. Half of it was psychosomatic. He was stressed. Indicating to his cigarette, he explained that he was trying to quit for Mary, Thomas and the girls, that he would never smoke in front of them.

“It is alright, my boy,” Samuel assured him with a smile and a clap on his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to take you by surprise. I didn’t say anything, but I am here if you wish to talk.”

“I don’t,” John replied, pressing the filter to his lips. Samuel nodded his understanding and did not pursue the matter. The words came, however, with a cloud of smoke when John exhaled.

“When Effie was pregnant with Elizabeth, I asked Edmund Hewlett to read my mother’s suicide note. It is all that I have of her and I couldn’t bring myself … I wanted to know, if I, that is if I would be a good parent. If I should read it. He said no. No that I should not read it not that – it doesn’t matter though, does it? The funny thing is though, Edmund read it, and I know his wife Anna and my girlfriend Mary have as well … and Ben Tallmadge. I’m not curious anymore. I have a decent idea of its contents. Edmund, Anna, Ben, if they are complaining about their own mothers, they will drop the matter altogether when I enter the room. Mary will never admit to the stress of the job, even when four little ones are screaming for her at once and not one of them will allow themselves to be comforted by myself or our au pair. With Tallmadge it might owe itself to religion. I am sure that must fall somewhere in the Ten Commandments. Nancy Smith, Anna’s mum, has moments where we are all given to wanting to complain about her. But Anna won’t. Not before me. And Edmund’s mother, Lady Edna, we can make excuses but – I mean, what does that say of mine? What must have she been like to make that lot love theirs more in light of whatever she wrote?”

“Your mother loved you, John. The way in which she expressed it remains unthinkable, but she died feeling that it was the only way she could provide you with a loving home. I did my best, I, had I known the extent of her illness I would have taken you in to begin with. But her struggles with her own life bear no impact on your ability to give your girls a happy home.”

“The thing is, I fear it does. I look at Percy and think,” he paused. “Jeanne dances, you know? Well. She tiers herself out running around in a tutu. I never pick her up at the studio. I should. I know.”

Samuel smiled. “I bet you let her show you all that she has learned though and twirl her about whenever she asks.”

“Yea.”

“I have to be honest with you, John,” he nodded. “I never much cared for football, either. But I did my best to schedule my leave around when I knew you were having an important match.”

“You even cheered for us when we played the kids from Eton,” John smiled slightly in recollection.

“And in the spirt of honesty, my boy, half of that is because my wife had herself once attended York,” Samuel chuckled. “You are a good father, John. I know you encourage your children’s interests even if you find you are unable to share them. The fact that you do so likely means more than it would if you were a true enthusiast yourself.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Naturally.”
“How did you … approach Ms Spinkels in offering your hand and asking for hers?”

“Oh dear,” his godfather remove his glasses and rubbed his temples.

“I’m sorry, I, I shouldn’t have -”

“You mean because of Elizabeth?”

“Things between your niece and myself -”

“My boy, I’m glad. I’m glad you’ve moved on and I hope you’ll allow her the same opportunities to do the same. As to Margaret and I – the thing is, I didn’t ask. She did as we were getting ready for a social event I had no desire to attend. I was struggling with my tie, she sorted it in a matter of seconds, asked me to help her with the clasp of her necklace and suggested that we might continue our partnership indefinitely. An hour into hors d’oeuvres, I sent my driver to get us takeaway, she stole a bottle of wine from the kitchen and we met on the roof to enjoy cabernet sauvignon with a few cheeseburgers. One of the kids working catering for the event caught us when he snuck away for a smoke, Margaret looked at him and said of our chosen dinner ‘I mean … no offence’ and as the two shared a laugh I realised I had made the best decision of my life. Or she made it for me, rather, she typically does. In your case, I think you may be overthinking things. I’ve spent more than half my life on a ship and I can say definitively that if you need to travel the length of the ocean to find something to serve as an excuse for your cowardice, you are not likely to find one.”

“My cowardice, Sir?” John inhaled sharply from the blow.

“Man up, John. Ours is far from a traditional family, but it is a family all the same, and I would argue, a happy one at that. Percy is part of it now, in part through you, in part through Effie – can’t you at least try?”

“I’m jealous,” he admitted. “Not of the memories he has but the ones that he doesn’t.”

“Then try to make new ones,” Samuel suggested with a wink.

Back inside however, John found the past was set on haunting him.

“I still maintain that if we had done ‘King John’ like I wanted, we’d have all left Year Ten with our dignity intact,” Ban was in the process of insisting over the protests of the two women they had known as girls. Everyone in the room smiled at him when he entered. He was quick to find that a picture of Percy in a tutu had apparently been answered with one of him in a frilly dress. “It is a striking family resemblance,” Ban remarked before John had gathered the nerve and words to support a defence of his character.

“I told you -” he started.

“I didn’t!” his former classmate protested. “Ms Spankels – um, Spinkels was the one to come out with the photo album.”


John looked at his makeshift-mum in confused bewilderment. “Weren’t you just on a cruise?” he
inquired. “You packed … for a holiday to Norway, a heavy album with photographs of Effie and I at the most awkward stages of our lives? I have to ask -”

“I missed you both terribly,” Margaret pouted. “No, John. I had my PA send it though same day delivery when Ms Nantaba was showing me pictures earlier. The drone arrived while you were partaking in that disgusting habit of yours. Oh! The things you’ve managed to pick up from your godfather.”

“I picked up smoking from Edmund Hewlett,” John murmured as his eyes scanned pages documenting various misadventures of the boy he had been decades before.

“That is a theme with us,” Ellie smarted. “John will find a way to blame every ill in this world on a member of my family -”

“No,” he said in protest. “He really did give me my first fag.”

“John, come off of it,” Effie began.

“Why ‘King John’?” Dembe asked Ban, ignoring the commotion.

“Have you read it?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Neither have I. That is the point. No one has. I should highly doubt our English teacher had done either,” Ban explained with unreserved enthusiasm that gave John cause to wonder if the lad mightn’t still stage the production if afforded a venue. “We were given the choice to either stage a play at the end of the semester or sit an exam,” he continued rapidly, “and everyone but Effie here took the first option. It was too much work, if I’m to be honest. We had the option to slack the whole spring and then talk about Magna Carta – which I assume the work to be about – in iambic pentameter or our best approximation of it – it wouldn’t ever have mattered. We could have faked it. But no. We put it to popular vote and ended up with ‘Romeo and Juliette’ which everyone can quote in their sleep and had to put an effort in.”

“And we you part of that decision?” Dembe asked John, trying not to laugh.

“Absolutely not,” he replied with noted umbrage, adding with a glance to his brother, “‘Richard III’ was my nomination, funnily enough.”

“I wanted to do ‘Julius Caesar’, but one of those modern interpretations where the set looks like Westminster and everyone just wears a suit,” Ellie said. “It was every. other. girl. in our year set on playing Juliette to Dean’s Romeo. He was easily the best actor of us and we all fancied him terribly at the time.”

“I didn’t,” Effie countered. “I just liked the play.”

“This isn’t true,” Ban said of Effie. “As soon as we decided on a script the girls set about sabotaging one another and John and I decided one night – I think this was right after Emma broke your nose, Ells – that something needed to be done.”

“Emma wasn’t even in that class,” Effie squinted.

“No. The fight was spreading to the entire female portion of the student body,” Ban insisted. “Action had to be taken.”
“For the record,” Ellie address the room, “Emma and I had a pact to have at one another the next time we had lacrosse or field hockey in sport because we both wanted to get our noses done over the Easter holiday and our fathers weren’t understanding of our wishes. There were fights over the role, it is true. I wasn’t involved in any of them. Knowing that I’d likely still be bruised and bandaged come opening curtain, I focused my efforts on the logistical end, securing a venue, doing publicity and I dare say -”

“Is that true?” Ban gaped. “About your nose?”

“Yes,” Ellie smiled. “And it was all to do with Dean, too. I mean I was still grossly thin and had a haircut that was awful now that I look back, but your sister came away from the incident super cute and the two ended up dating for part of the summer,” she winked.

“Unbelievable,” John muttered.

“Eleanor, I don’t think I’ve ever been quite so proud of you,” Margaret admitted. “Going to such efforts in pursuit of appearances.”

“Aren’t you supposed to say something like ‘true beauty comes from within’?” Ban challenged.

“No one is arguing that it doesn’t but I run a fashion magazine and the noughties were brutal.”

“Plus, I’m ugly on the inside and I’ve never much been one to need that kind of pep talk,” Ellie offered with a perfect, pearl-white smile.

“As proof of this, you didn’t say anything in my defence when it was decided that since in Shakespeare's day, female parts were played by male actors we were going to do the same,” John added.

“Had I thought – for a minute, that you’d be awarded the lead -”

“It is the voice,” Ban said with a gesture to his own throat.


“Rather ableist of you,” John slighted her. This had the desired effect of causing Ellie to lose her practiced composure and contort her face in a way only conceivable with the Hewlett kaleidoscope of strong features at play.

“I merely -” she stammered.

“No matter. ‘Twas the cross I carried for you any every other girl in our school whom I didn’t want to see injured over something which … I, clearly, executed so much better than any of you would be prima donnas could have ever conceived of,” he smirked, mostly in reaction to everyone’s sudden attempt to mimic her bewildered yet offended expression.

“It is true, we sold out the house,” Ellie said. “Another year tried to replicate ‘Shakespeare in the Pub’ a year later and it just … didn’t go off.”

“Ban lead this coalition of our classmates in arguing that Shakespeare in the Pub sounded way more interesting than ‘in the Park’,” Effie clarified for those who had not been present.

“Which anyone can do and is usually shite,” Ban clamoured.

“So Effie, you didn’t want to be part of it after being denied the lead?” Zeinab pried.
“I was on put on hair and make up … just though that I could better display my knowledge of the material by sitting the exam than by arguing with boys about wearing eyeliner.”

“Really?” Marie asked. “I thought that everyone back then was listening to MCR and pretending life was awful.”

“Ever try to tell an emo kid to tone it down?” Effie returned.

“Every damn day,” Marie answered.

“Well, picture that times thirty and such was my stage experience. I wrote my exam with distinction though,” she smiled. John wondered if Margaret was going to follow this exaggeration with one of her own, that Effie’s essay had gone on to be awarded some literary prize, perhaps. He found her staring at him and his proud smile faded to fret, remembering that he had been the one whose sullen nature had made it impossible for her to continue with the production.

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” Ban laughed. “You got a perfect mark, I got a pass, John got to star and Ells – I mean you just spent the night chatting up Beatrice and Eugine at the bar if I recall correctly, but I guess there is something to be said for forcing top tier royals into fulfilling some miserable societal requirement.”

“’Tis,” his wife admitted.

“Did you ever have to wear make-up for dance?” Effie asked Percy.

“If you two are really set on going to the old dance studio tomorrow there is probably a picture of Percy all done up still hanging in the foyer,” Dembe said.

“Oh, the studio? We will make a day of it,” Zeinab smiled. “We will show you kids around central Leicester and -”

“Mum, I was actually thinking that I could – I promised Effie that I would teach her to waltz and -”

“Maybe you could teach all of us?” John suggested lightly. He would come to regret it.

Chapter End Notes

Unlike Effie, I had little trouble finding exactly what I needed on YouTube this morning. In case you missed Eurovision as well, here is hands down the best song ever preformed at the competition. Ever. No, it is not from 2018 and no, it didn’t win.

Right, okay, yeah – so, end notes:

Sheikh Hassan Sazeli first boiled coffee beans on a journey to Mecca in 1258. During the decline of the Ottoman Empire, illegal coffeehouses honoured him by displaying banners in which he was depicted as ‘his holiness’. I think there must have been a pun in this somewhere that doesn’t translate.

Franz Kolschitzky was a Pole living in Vienna during the Ottoman siege of the city in 1683. Previously, he had lived in Istanbul and was fluent in Turkish. Donning an enemy
uniform, he went out to spy on the besiegers and gathered crucial intelligence that gave the Austrians room to attack. The Ottomans fled leaving everything behind, including 500 sacks of coffee beans which Kolschitzky then claimed for himself and turned into the first-ever coffeehouse in Europe.

**Arthur Wellesley**’s first commission legit involved him planning subpar parties for his superior officers. He would up Prime Minister a few times and Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, so things turned out okay for him. He and Ban Tarleton historically hated each other, something that Tarleton later acknowledged likely kept him from an active field command. The Duke of Wellington was also a noted womanizer which to my mind contradicts everything I’ve read about him being haughtily, a poor host and otherwise dull company and conversation – but you know that they say about a man in uniform (… he has a steady pay check. ;) Kitty was real, too, and the two really had this gross, angsty teen-drama-type-romance only to eventually marry as adults and find they couldn’t stand one another’s presence. The Euro-mullet, too, has a historical basis.

**Chelsea’s Headhunters** have strong ties to white supremacy.

The poem John recites is Bertolt Brecht’s *Von der Kindsmörderin Marie Farrar* and is available online. ([German](https://www.elibri.de/00499000832070015259/449551/449556) ([English](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18266/18266-h/18266-h.htm))

I had to throw a google on this one, but so you know **King John** has nothing to do with **Magna Carta**. The rest of Shakespeare’s works mentioned in this chapter I’m sure you’ve all read and/or seen countless productions of. Let’s make a pact never to speak of his best received plays because I love you all and really want to say friends.

As always, thanks for reading! XOXO – Tav

Up Next: John’s efforts to befriend his brother create problems for Effie.
A Casual[ty]

Chapter Summary

John finds himself on his back after a one-sided skirmish with an unlikely assailant.
Percy finds himself envying his employers as he watches his brother kicking a ball out back with Marie.

Chapter Notes

This month has me in a weird place, as soon as football ended, Ramadan began, so I am kind of going on without food or fodder. That feels a decent enough description for this chapter, too. Knowing my audience, I hazard to guess this isn’t quite going to work for you, and, I mean, that is cool – whatever. Teenagers can be trying even when they aren’t faced with impending death and dislocation. I get it. Anyway, if any of you are fighting boredom on public transit, I suppose this is as decent tactic as any, so this week your warnings include: violence, sex ed, teens on social media, sport, frank discussions around the death of a parent, lack of confidence in one’s creative output, high fashion hooliganism, and other mental hang-ups.

Still with me? Stellar, darling – I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The motion sensor light flickered on, hastening his steps to the glass panelled doors separating the Nantabas’ sizeable kitchen from what the day would soon reveal to be an even more impressive home garden. He watched on as some sound or scent animated the dreary, dreaming dogs to rise and match an unseen commotion with their own; the smaller of the two racing to meet it. John Graves Simcoe felt himself grow tense as the prospect of contending with a gush of wind rustling that which tried to bud and bloom, a car rolling past or a kid with a newspaper route. Certain as he was that the commotion was needless, the night had afforded him little rest and as such, his weary eyes scanned the kitchen in search of something with which to make a stand.

He was not sure if the dogs continued to bark, if it was their short sprints that continued to keep the yard illuminated or something far more sinister. He had removed his hearing aid after hanging up with his girlfriend hours before and his ears were still ringing with the sound of her laughter. The conversation had been brief, Mary wanting to know what time it was, telling him that she was in the middle of making dinner, that she would call him back tomorrow after her date at the driving range. John knew that by ‘date’ his girlfriend was referring to a number of geriatric justices whom she hoped to influence with her backswing, having taken up the sport upon learning that most in the legal profession preferred to hear oral argument over eighteen holes than in the hallowed halls of justice. However, he also knew that Mary would be in the company of her ex and his father, that Abe would offer the same condensation that defined their marriage until such time that Mary won the attention of a few important onlookers by proving herself a better shot. It was backroom business, he told himself, but it was also a part of her that would always exist independently of him or of the life they were in the process of building together.
Mary Woodhull had been married when they met.

Divorced, she and Abraham were closer than they had been sharing the same bed. When he rang from his office in Alexandria, she always afforded him the benefit of her conversation, regardless of the hour or of whatever else she was engaging in.

John had never much liked Abraham, independent of Mary and the influence he had over her. Hearing Abe in the background, laughing with Thomas and Jeanne in a space John would rather to have imagined himself as occupying in Mary’s DC flat, he had laid awake most of the night wishing for home or for something to fully remove him from it. When it seemed a reasonable hour to rise, he did so, intending to seek solace in smoke. Now, he found himself hoping for fire.

He unlatched the sliding door and opened it ever so slightly, just enough to squeeze though. Mou, upon hearing John, now armed with a serrated blade drawn from a wooden block on the counter, yelped twice more in the direction of what John could now see was an intruder before turning to meet him, his wee tail wagging back and forth by way of greeting.

John fought the sudden instinct to kneel and caress the small animal, itself now too old, too well-trained or both to jump and nip at his kneecaps as it had when he was a boy. He told himself that had a duty to protect this family, this house, and could not allow for any such distractions. His eyes, unblinking, despite their usual morning fatigue and the jet lag that amplified it, found their focus on a figure illuminated on the fence. He gave a strongly worded warning prior to his advance, causing the intruder to drop what looked to be a rucksack. This, to the ‘peppy’ puppy, was of far greater interest than the enemy or task it had assigned itself in sounding the alarm, and it began sniffing to the evident annoyance of the clumsy would-be-criminal.

John grabbed the black-clad intruder from behind when at last they made it over the spiked wooden barrier, raising his adoptive blade to their throat. He opened his mouth with the intent of supplying a barrage of condemnations and threats he half-intended to carry out, but within the same second, he found himself on his back, gasping for breath as the intruder crushed his most vulnerable assets with a high, hard mule-kick. The knife had been removed from his hand in the same quick retaliation.

The embarrassment only worsened when he forced his eyelids apart to find little Marie Robinson extending him her right hand whilst the left unconsciously moved in unison with her return fire, much of it of the sort that would shame the man from whom she had doubtlessly learned this particular lexicon. She wanted to know why he was not wearing his hearing aid and this she asked in such a way that misused the same continuous verb as both adjective and adverb before moving onto other expletives as she offered the correct assessment that he well could have killed her.

“Marie,” John said at last as he rose, bent, gripping his knees as he struggled to regain his equilibrium. “It is five in the morning.”

She stated at him blankly for a moment, as if to question if this was a defence of his assault or a politer means of inquiring what she was doing sneaking about at this hour. “I have to give my dogs food and water,” she shrugged. “And clean up any mess they made last night here in the yard. Rude to leave their shite laying about for the Nantabas the step in, ‘innit?” she squinted. “I didn’t want to knock because it felt too early as you imply. What about you? Having a fag?”

He had known Marie since she was a toddler - innocent and fully ignorant to the world and its vices. She was at least as tall as her mother now, and years of training had left her still-awkward, lanky body toned with lean muscle she tried to disguise beneath adidas track bottoms and a nondescript loose hooded sweatshirt. Her long, naturally blonde hair was chemically lightened and practically white in florescent light of any sort; in the moon’s pale glow, her neat braids looked silver and the few small pink spots that dotted her cheeks forehead were less apparent than they were when
disguised by the cheap cosmetics that likely caused the skin condition that would disappear with age. She was not yet the beauty she would doubtlessly be in a few years’ time and John considered that like most girls he knew to have grown up with sport, she would never quite see herself in such terms. Though she did no slouch, she twisted her fingers and pulled at her sleeves in such a way as to make herself seem smaller, embarrassed of her athleticism and the strength that came to her with ease. She seemed, too, to be making a conscious effort to use less course language. John smiled. Defa to her voice, he continued to hear that of her father as she forced a laugh. “It is o’rite, I’ll turn my back is you want and pretend I don’t know what you are doing. Like honestly thought, you pulled a knife on me, mate. After that, do you really think I’ll be psychologically tormented by watching you scar up your own lungs?”

“I apologise … again. Truly. I thought …” John reached for her shoulder, finding only how closely they stood in the smallness of his movements. Marie’s pulse was racing. He gave her a small pat before removing his hand from her person and taking a step back. She was terrified but tried with all of her might not to show it. Her speech seemed to keep pace with her heart, to the point where John found he was having trouble keeping up. He felt awful for having caused her such a fright. Strong though she was, she was still just a girl who should have never been put in such a position as to prove her growing physical prowess.

“You didn’t. Think, I mean. Like I know I shouldn’t be answering this and you probably can’t answer anyway, but how the fuck did you manage to hold Benedict Arnold hostage for months when you are so … like, this shouldn’t be a criticism but criminally inept? Think on it for a moment, yea? On this street, there are five houses empty for Easter, why would anyone then try to rob the one with four cars in the driveway? It is just a common-sense thing, yea?” Marie prattled.

“That is … quite an assessment,” John frowned.

“I’m right though. Like, I go to Scotland a lot to visit my little sister, and – it is admittedly a really weird set up,” she explained, unprompted. “Her mum became really close to one of the nans she was looking after when she was court-ordered to do community service, but like, to the point where they are family now in all but blood and name. Any road, she lived with her son before - now they all live together – he, that is, Mr Ferguson, Nan’s son, he used to be a cop before he became an accountant so sometimes when I visit I’ll ask him about crime statistics I’ve seen in the papers and he will give a professional assessment, which is kind of cool. Sometimes he will get roped into some actual detective work and if it is safe … or if he forgets to ask my dad or Ellie, he will let me come along on a steak out, which is wicked.”

John and Ferguson were acquainted, and as such he could hardly believe there was any element of truth in this assessment. The man was by no stretch ‘cool’. Still, the girl smiled when she spoke of him. Partially out of guilt, John returned it.

“Is that also where you learned self-defence?” he inquired.

“No,” Marie shrugged with seeming disappointment. “Mr Patel taught me a few moves, but Krav Maga is part of our reproductive health curriculum at my school.”

“How is that?”

“It is the moment. Basically, we have a guest speaker come in every few weeks to explain to the entire student body that no means no and then the girls are made to spend our sport hour learning what to do if the lads still hear ‘yes’ while they get to go off and play footy which is lame when you think about it for half a second. Aside from you just now, the only place I’ve ever had to provide for my own defence was at Ibrox Stadium, and that incident was sectarian rather than sexual in nature.”
“Times have really changed,” John mused. “When I was your age we barely touched on biology at all and ‘no’ was just a given.”

“Because of the fashion?”

“What?”

“Because of the fashion?” Marie articulated, slower, but not insultingly so. “I’ve seen pictures from that era - spiked hair, frosted tips. Like I’d not have been able to talk to a lad without laughing, so I reason it must have been awful asking girls out.”

“I’m about a decade younger than you date me,” John said, taking another half step back. “‘No’ was school policy on just about everything.”

“I retract everything I said about wishing that I went there, then,” Marie answered, kneeling to return to the task of caring for her dogs. “Mine is still a giant, stone thesis of the ills of authoritarianism, but they only have us seven hours each day and some of that is spent preparing us for what to do when no one is around to police ‘public displays of affection’. Its bullocks though. All of it,” she paused. “Sorry if I hurt you, by the way. It was just a reaction.”

“Only my pride. The fault is mine. I’m sorry for forcing you into something you learned at school over a holiday weekend,” John said weakly. “I’m sure your dad would be proud.”

“You don’t know him, then. Say anything of this and he will never let me do anything with my mates ever again,” she moaned. John vaguely remembered a conversation the two had had the night before, Ban wanting Marie to come to the hotel the Graves’ were so kind as to offer after being refused by Effie and himself. Dembe, meanwhile, had invited Marie to spend the night with her and Ban had only relented to this request after Ellie gave him a gentle reminder of how terribly they had all needed the company of their peers in their formative years.

His lady-wife’s influence aside, John had no trouble imagining that Tarleton was ordinarily as much of a tyrant when it came to his child’s chosen company and assigned curfew as he was when it came to immigration and monetary policy, and that the easy understanding he and Marie once shared was now taught with the threat of losing custody as well as the typical problems of puberty. Marie seemed mature enough to understand her father’s perspective but far too youthful and inexperienced to fully appreciate the scope of his concerns. All the same, thinking of what it must be to have Ban as a parental figure, John found himself siding with the fifteen-year-old. He apologised again for reacting with force to her efforts to do what he gathered were he chores, assuring her that he had no greater interest in discussing the incident with her dad than she did.

“We’re cool. I’ll have a halfway decent drinking story for this afternoon, which is for the best, because Arthur’ll be despondent and fully non-communicative,” she elongated, explaining, “Kitty changed her relationship status over Facebook last night to ‘It’s complicated’ by which I’m sure she can only mean ‘for everyone else’ because she won’t deal with it. I sent her a text but she has yet to respond.”

Having very little idea as to what was meant, John felt every year Marie unfairly attributed to him moments before.

“It is five in the morning,” he advised, thinking Kitty (should she exist) might well be asleep.

Marie shook her head. “Last night, I mean, after I saw it. I mean it is kind of whatever, we are only friends by proxy and – I don’t know. Maybe it is for the best. I mean, it isn’t. It is selfish and I shouldn’t think like this, but theirs is more a sext-based affair, they break up every time they are
faced with one another and this time I am kind of glad for the distraction.”

John was not sure how he was meant to respond or if it was even his place to do so. Grateful that he had at least a decade to think on it before any comparable scenario might arise with one of his daughters, he started, “Your dad thinks that you and this Arthur are an … item?” he tried.

“Oh Christ!” Marie rolled her eyes, letting him know he needn’t bother. “You know what? Let him. Let him worry about that so we can all not deal with this weekend. Sorry,” she stopped, rested her hands on her hips and readjusted. “No, I’m not. It is not fair. How old are you, John? Thirty? Forty? You can’t deal with your mum either and everyone - literally everyone - is accepting of that. Expect me. What if I get to your age and I still … never mind.” She crossed her arms and closed herself. He matched her posture.

“That is a very rude thing to say.”

“Have your fag and I’ll look away if it makes you more comfortable. I need to see if my dogs left anything for me to clean up.”

With that, John did as he was commanded without further thought or argument.

He went inside and made them both a cup of tea when he finished indulging his vice, hearing all the while over Mary’s imagined laughter the seeming fair accusations of the little lady who shared his girlfriend’s given name. He wondered what kind of a precedent he had unintentionally set for a child faced with the same problems that had defined his youth. Mary Robinson, or so he gathered from the weekly celebrity rags Mary and Anna were given to buying at the grocer’s and swapping with more immediate gossip, was foregoing further treatment and would be dead within the year. It wasn’t suicide as much as it was abandonment, especially as she seemed to expect her daughter to leave London and the life she knew to live with her and a stranger who had afforded them both his surname in a small cottage in Wales. From his friends based in Europe, John knew that Marie had not lived with her mother at all for nearly two years, that their calls were increasingly short and sporadic, that the man she had adopted in all but name to be her father was exemplary in fulfilling that post against sudden accusations that he was unfit to serve as guardian.

Never otherwise shy with a witty insult, Ban held back on whatever feelings he had around his ex in front of Marie. John had known the same from his own father. Seeing the symmetry, he missed him more.

He felt guilty in his withdrawal, his unwillingness to connect to his brother, to appreciate his godfather, to let go of old grudges – to indulge the regrettable tendencies and tantrums of his worst self before someone trying not to relate to his pain. He had felt bad that the teen had recognised that he wanted a cigarette. He felt that he could not forgive himself if he let her leave for Liverpool with the expectation that she might, as she put it, be no more equipped to deal with her mother’s passing than she currently was or he had ever been.

He had to get over it. Chivalry demanded such, and he owed it to Maire to show that dragons could be slain as well he did before all who had elected to let him be part of their lives. He had, however, no idea what to say to improve the situation he had long let fester.

When John went back outside with the tea he had prepared, he saw Marie kicking a ball for the dogs to bring back to her.

“Not like that,” he said, stopping the ball before moving to demonstrate. “Here, try to use the inside of your foot, like this. You could injure yourself if you keep using your toes.”
“Really?” Marie blinked. John wondered that Ban had never kicked a ball with her or instructed her how to do so properly.

“I’ve seen more than my share of toenails pop and peel right off from kicking it the way you do.”

“I guess that is why a good half of my girlfriends never wear sandals,” Marie smiled, laughing a little over something she did not elect to share.

“You don’t play?” John asked lightly.

“Not in a Sunday league side or anything. Loads of my friends do though. Yasmin has since she was little, Susan and Rachel joined up when every girl in Britain wanted to be Lady Anna for five minutes around when she and Edmund got married. I thought about it then, too, but fencing takes up basically all of my free time and my mum went back into treatment not long after so,” she stopped abruptly. “Sorry. And I am sorry about what I said earlier. And I’m sorry I startled you before that, and … thank you for the cuppa.”

“You are a fast learner,” John dismissed, studying her pass.

“I’m a semi-professional athlete,” Maire answered. “Like it is dumb, a bout only lasts three minutes and more often than not, less, but you have to so much footwork that you have to train constantly that you become unconscious of it – Percy teaches me ballet, too, it is not that different in principle. Repetition. Loads of repetition. Passing from the inside isn’t hard, just no one ever showed me before.”

“What is that like?” John inquired after a few minutes had passed, drinking his rooibos while watching Marie repeat the motion, alternating between both of her feet until it seemed she had mastered this dance.

“Hm?”

“Percy … as a teacher?”

“He is like you, soft spoken, but like, you wouldn’t argue with him, you know?”

“Sure.”

“Are you nervous about dancing later? I know a bit I can show you, if you want. Unless it is not that.”

“You needn’t trouble yourself,” John said as he took to playing with her after putting both cups on the porch table. Mou and Pep delighted in the game’s pace until they realized it was no longer meant for them and retired to their water bowl after a few nips and weak growls directed at the play thing that nearly matched them in size.

“I don’t sing either,” Marie told him. “I never have. I don’t sing, and I won’t go out for school productions even though everyone always says that I should and that I’d be brilliant at it, and I write, but I would never in my life show it to anyone because I just hate even the concept of being compared to my mum. So, I do get it. If you are nervous about dancing, I mean. Like I know it isn’t the same, but …”

“Please,” John encouraged. He continued to pass the ball with her, now jogging up and down the yard. He noted that with every word Marie’s kick grew harder but keeping his own level to challenge without overwhelming a girl with limited playing experience, he doubted she was aware of her own force. He expected as much. He had gotten the kids he coached to open up while running
similar drills with them after training had ended.

“Okay, she has been sick for most of my life. We only found out by accident, she got pregnant from my dad, from Ban, I mean, and I remember going to school one day thrilled that when I came home I’d find out if I was going to have a little brother or sister, but then they – the ultrasound, it found something else and they made a bunch of tests and it turned out she had cancer and well, she couldn’t have the baby or any more besides, but she was always so, with me anyway, just so positive, even with the Chemo and hormones and hospital stays and all of it, she was always my mum, no matter how many times it came back or how many surgeries she had to endure, she never surrendered anything of herself to the illness,” Marie said. “Looking back now though, I mean I know that could not have strictly been the case, especially listening to some of her lyrics from an art imitates life perspective I know … I probably always knew. I always knew she was going to die before I finished school, and I think I’m pretty well prepared for that, or I would be, if only she would keep up her end of the bargain and just keep being my mum. The way she was, the way I always knew her.

“She got back with her husband recently and from the way she talks about him it is like she suddenly needs to pretend the life she led was the one she envisioned at nineteen, like who she was wasn’t good enough. Like we weren’t. My dad and I.” She stopped the ball and stopped running. John crossed to meet her, intending to offer another cup of tea, but found himself in an embrace surprise made him slow to return.

“I’ve never met Thomas Robinson,” Marie continued. “I don’t want to, but that isn’t really what it is, is it? I’m not afraid of him. I’m afraid that I am going to identify this ghost of my mum too much with the spirit that has clearly already left her and I am bloody terrified of that. So … I get why you don’t dance and don’t like that Percy does.”

John swallowed. “I don’t know how to miss my mother. I do, I miss the idea I had of her before meeting her, not the woman, but I feel that I am responsible for making her the way she was and I don’t know how to reconcile that with myself or with my younger brother. I’m angry that his entire idea of her comes from this connection he has to her art and I’ve denied myself, or been denied by proximity, the same way I’m sure you sometimes struggle to get through much of your mother’s creative body of work,” he paused, “I was out here, last night, trying to find in a cigarette the same essence of escape you are hoping for in your friends when I chanced into a conversation with my godfather – like yours, the man who raised me for the better part of my life. He said I might try to make new memories. To be honest, I don’t know that it is worth it and I don’t know that I want to, but I owe it to myself to try. I owe it to Percy as well, and to Effie, the Nantabas, Samuel and Margaret, Mary and our daughters, and now to you.”

“Me?” Marie squinted.

John smiled, removed the ball from between her feet with his own and continued the game. “You know,” he started, “I’ve known your dad since I was younger than you are now. I’ve never understood him and I doubt I ever shall, but part of me can’t help but to be jealous all the same. There are times I swear I’m afraid to be happy, but your dad? He is terrified of being sad. Always has been, and counterintuitive as it seems that can prove every bit as destructive. The very last thing I want to do is leave you with is the impression that you should be afraid to feel. Be angry at your mother if you need to be. Talk to her, tell her … tell her this horrible, horrible thing isn’t just happening to her, you are having to watch it, to live it,” he began to rant, drawing perhaps too deeply from the experiences of which Marie seemed to relate. “Tell her because if you don’t when you have the chance you are going to be living this for the rest of your life and in some way, big or small, so will everyone in your vicinity. You told me earlier that you thought everyone is accepting of the distance I’ve placed between myself and my memories, and to be honest – I think you are right, and I
wish you weren’t. Because they deserve better. And so do I. And so does she. Kathrine. My mum. And that is really, really hard to admit.”

“Do you want me to teach you some of the ballet moves Percy is teaching me?” Marie tried. Again, John worried that he had only succeeded in frightening her.

“No,” John stopped the ball, “… but I would quite like it if you were to show me some of your poems.”

“You’d think they are dumb,” she assessed.

“I doubt that. Can I show you something else?” he asked, changing tactics.

“A poem?”

“No. How to dribble properly.”

Though neither of them wore proper shoes and the football was wanting for inflation, John took pains patiently demonstrating how to move control the ball between one’s feet. As the hour turned, Marie seemed to have it down. “It is its own sort of dance, isn’t it?” he asked, taking a bit of pride in his abilities as a trainer.

“I guess.”

“So is fencing,” he told her. “It is how the world has taught you how to lay your soul bare, and I am but certain your poetry is as pointed and precise as you are on a piste.”

“You still want me to show you?”

“Why don’t you show your mum?” he suggested.

“I’m not nearly as good as she is.”

“That is subjective.”

“I’m worried that she won’t think I’m good at all though.”

“You ever spar with Ellie? In fencing?” he asked as he took possession.

“Of course, I’d be a fool not to,” Marie answered and she struggled and failed to regain the ball from his more able feet.

“You ever beat her?”

“Not often.”

“Is it worth your while all the same?”

Marie smiled her understanding. “You are good at this,” she gave him.

“I’m Sunday league,” John snorted. “So are my poems if I am being honest with myself, but I’ve shown a few to your mum as well. I don’t know if you were old enough to remember, but I used to live upstairs from you two when you were quite small.”

“When you and Aunt Effie were together?”
“Yea.”

“Is it weird for you, her and Percy?” Marie asked, shy but curious all the same. John found him searching for a reply that might satisfy them both.

“It is weird that … given a different set of dialectics he is who I would be, or rather who I would hope to aspire to being. And he is with Effie. And that makes sense, somehow – somehow it is closure,” he stated plainly. “I wanted this ideal my whole life, all of it, not just Kathrine, but the little family on a quiet street, and now that I am here, it doesn’t feel all that different from home, my home in New York, which is the only place I want to be.”

“What do you mean? About wanting to be Percy? Because he got to create his own version of your parents?”

“Because he got to know himself before learning how to manage personal tragedy. I still struggle with both,” John admitted.

“Maybe he does, too. Like you said you were jealous of my dad because he can be so upbeat about basically anything, but trust me, he gets sad and stressed about the smallest things, it is ridiculous. He just doesn’t bring that to a dinner party. Maybe it is the same with Percy.”

“No, no, I know -” John frowned, feeling the accusation he was not entirely sure had been intended.

“I get what you mean though. I feel like, I spent most of my life trying to distance myself from my mum, and now I wish I had more of her inside of me, like I was more the way I knew her to have been, because she could deal with all of my bullshit now better than I can.”

“Sometimes the way things are is indeed better than the way you wish them to be. Come, let’s sit down, let me put another pot on.”

“Okay.”

“What do you think they are talking about?” Effie yawned.

“If only I had my brother’s talents at lip reading.”

Percy had been watching his brother play football since he had woken up in the same way he always did, namely, to Mou and Pep’s barking. It had taken him a few minutes to orientate himself to the surroundings he had not seen in two years, longer still to the action unfolding below his bedroom window. Effie had slept through most of the match. Even knowing that there was a beautiful woman naked under his sheets, he felt somewhat loath to look away from a game that had since become one-sided. He pictured what it would have been like to grow up with an older brother in the way he had not been able to since meeting the man and discovering that John had not even a passing fancy in getting to know him, much less being a family in any loose sense. Watching him teach Marie to pass and dribble, he returned to former fantasies that had long sustained his search for his birth family – a caring brother to show him his way in sport before boring of it and demonstrating how much better he was and would always be. He smiled. Then frowned. Everything he recognised in the interaction was illusionary. Even if John had the qualities he had so easily ascribed to him somewhere in the depths of his soul, he had no interest in sharing this part of himself with the little brother he was keen to deny. Percy wondered what it was that he was doing there, if John had come with the best
intentions only to have them abandon him entirely at the sight of Effie, or, more likely, at the sight of him.

The adjacent wall was covered entirely covered in a mirror Percy had only ever been want to look in for the purpose of dance practice, his father having installed a ballet bar in the same weekend home-improvement project. Effie had delighted in it the evening prior, thrilled at the prospect of watching herself in the act. He couldn’t share her enthusiasm and couldn’t come at the sight of an elfin princess placed under duress by a hideous, hulking orc. They shared his futon, the only bed that had been in his parent’s price range large enough to support his massive frame. Part of the fantasy of having a big brother, Percy now realised, was the concept of being small in any sense.

Enshrined on the desk by the window that had long since fit him stood a number of pictures of himself and his friends at various conventions, Percy cosplaying characters that fit his build. Part of him had always felt pixel-like, that nothing in nature ought to exist on such a scale. He glanced in the mirror he wanted badly to break, wondering what had stopped him in the adolescence that had seen him transform from tall to towering, from the fat kid who never got picked for sport to the man envied and admired by steroid-ridden fitness freaks at the various gyms to which he had been a member over the course of his lifetime.

Even sitting, his hair grazed the slanted ceiling of the converted attack space. Percy groaned and wondered aloud if Effie wished he more resembled his brother. Slender, short.

“What?” Effie scolded, unwilling to entertain his private doubts and desires. “John is 6’2.”

“I’m 6’6 and have at least eight stone on him,” Percy commented, sizing his brother up in the manner he might any threat. He felt Effie’s arms around his broad shoulders. “I think if I were the smaller of us two, he would have an easier time accepting me as his little brother,” he explained. “With his … hearing impairment, I imagine him to be a very visual person and I just don’t fit whatever picture he might have.”

“Is that your problem or is it that right now he fits your mental image?” his girlfriend observed.

Percy turned around to face her. Effie slid her petit, naked frame on to his lap. He held her first to help her find her balance and then for the simple pleasure of feeling her soft skin, still slightly sticky from the sweat of the night before. “Maybe try to talk to him about football?” she suggested. It took Percy a moment to register they were speaking of the brother he had all but forgotten in her golden-green eyes. “I know that your biological father was a QPR fan and that John inherited that trait. They have a match,” she squinted, “today? Tomorrow? I’d have to look at the text Eddie sent.” She swallowed. “John isn’t always the easiest person to get on with, sometimes I have to ask for tips, too.”

“From Edmund Hewlett?” Percy clarified with undisguised scepticism.

“Desperate times, my friend.”

“I spent my whole life in this confusion of hating and admiring Edmund Hewlett,” John told her as they sat to enjoy their second cup of tea – hers with milk, no sugar, his black but presumably sweetened with something as the presence of a spoon would seem to indicate. He gave her a sorry look as he reached into his jacked pocket for a fag. Marie nodded her consent. “We had gotten into a
spot of trouble or two when we were both boys and having barely known him outside of the sorts of situations lads our age out never to find themselves confronted with, I had this image of a calculating but cowardly man who always found success in the suffering of others. I detested him. I detested more that I aspired to that level of self-removal. Of course, I only know a fraction of what was really happening, and I still … there are times when I believe there was something to my original base assessment, but it probably took me too long to let go of this idol who served as a deposit for all of my anger and envy. We are friends now, the ‘real’ Edmund and I, which doesn’t mean that we don’t still fight over … well I can’t think of a topic on which we truly agree, but, to let you in on a little secret,” he leaned in, “it is easier to beat him now that he is human. But getting there is the hardest part. With your mum it is not that different, take the chance on the sides of her she is willing to share now that you are a bit older. She trusts you, and, knowing her myself, I trust that she loves you more than anything.”

“I know,” Marie nodded. In truth, she was not sure, but she liked the way John spoke, his falsetto and the unplaceable accent that made him seem wiser than he likely was.

“It is hard though. No way around that,” he continued, “I don’t know if he has ever talked to you about it, or it is my place to, but your dad’s father died of cancer, too, when he was only a little bit older than you are now, and it was as difficult for him to confront that there was more to the man he had lost than there was to the one he had known in this hero narrative he constructed. He never talked about it, but we all … we watched him destroy himself in this tragic attempt to combat death by living life to the absolute fullest, which for your father involved indulging his vices until he hit rock bottom before finding new, worse ones overseas … And then he had you to pull him out of that darkness.”

“Me?”

“Twice,” John smiled. “When he first came back from war and later, when … he had to readdress a number of unsolved issues around the lives and deaths of a few people you are too young to possibly remember. I think it was hard for him to see that had he been in his father’s position, he might have made a lot of the same decisions, or he might have made different ones for different reasons that came to the same yield. It is hard to forgive others their flaws, harder still to recognise how we mirror them.”

Marie wondered whose flaws John saw himself as reflecting and how much it might trouble him. She glanced down into her tea and tried to see herself in its still but couldn’t. She rather hoped her flaws resembled John’s - he was angry, sure, but sometimes, he said, that was okay, and being angry certainly felt better than feeling nothing at all when it came to her mum.

“Is that why you think he is so about forcing me to deal with my mother now?” she asked.

“Could well be. It could also be that having you there will help him through what I can only imagine must be very painful for him as well.”

“But they don’t love each other anymore,” Marie said flatly. They hadn’t for quite some time - at least since Georgie had been born - and, given the circumstances that typically lead to empty sex outside of a relationship, quite a bit longer than that. It was not that she wanted to see her parents back together. If anything, Marie hoped they would fight, really have it out in a final decisive battle. She hoped that they would then remember that they both loved her – or said they did – when settling on some sort of treaty.

John nodded as though he knew her thoughts without hearing them voiced. “They are not in love anymore, that doesn’t mean they don’t still love each other. I still love Effie though … I’m not doing the best of showing it, either.”
“As a sister?” Marie asked.

“Not quite. We don’t use the same kind of shampoo, which I believe is what determines these sorts of things. At least the way your dad sees the world.”

It might have been a mistake to suggest Percy speak to his brother about football after all. He had joined John downstairs after they had showered together, and had, insofar as she could follow, since assessed in the hour that passed every squad in Europe, finding few facts over which they were able to form a consensus of opinion. Edmund had perhaps been onto something in his advice as to what would make John show himself as being ‘the mad dog he was’ to borrow from the specific nomenclature of a passive aggressive society that named itself ‘polite’, and perhaps she would have done better to listen. Effie Gwillim, however, needed all the time the morning had to prepare herself for the day ahead.

Luckily, she had not been alone in this task.

Marie had all but raced up the stairs upon finding that she was awake, asking to borrow mousse for her hair that had become ‘sweaty’ and ‘gross’ during her impromptu training session. She, in turn, pulled Effie’s hair into a French braid and lent her the track bottoms she had slept in and a sports bra from her luggage when breakfast arrived with the car keys. “It will be fun,” Marie promised as Effie struggled to fit her breasts into a garment made for a girl of a smaller cup size. She changed into a pretty top and shorts Effie was half certain Ban would disallow, running her fingers awkwardly through the beach waves her ‘aunt’ had created out of her twin braids. “We have to wear our hair pulled back at school,” Marie told her. “I don’t know why, I always feel weird having it down.” Effie assured her that she looked pretty and that her boyfriend would think so as well, to which Marie only laughed. “Literally the worst thing about Arthur is that when you wear make-up, he’ll think that you are wearing it for him. It is like ugh. No.”

With that, Effie was reasonably assured that that Marie had a good head on her shoulders and quite possibly the Margaret app on her iPhone. She herself had no mind to fight the patriarchy this morning, however. Pressing breasts that had never before felt so voluptuous and plentiful as they did in a garment designed for teenage girls shopping on a high-street budget was battle enough for one morning. She lined her eyelids and put on an extra coat of mascara.

It was defiantly too much, but the same could be said of everything she found at the breakfast table when she at last descended the stairwell in her borrowed dancewear.

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel had provided the Nantabas with breakfast in thanks for their hospitality the night before. She had never known her aunt to eat much of a morning meal, and perhaps born from this lack of experience, Margaret had seemingly bought out an entire boulangerie. Zeinab thanked her warmly but eyed each individual pastry with marked suspicion. Ellie, who met her with a raised eyebrow, not having seen her closest female friend in sportswear since they had been at school themselves, received one herself from Effie who had never seen the former princess eat anything that looked remotely appetizing, full stop. She had a jam on the Gluten Free ™, Fair Trade™, Free Range™ cardboard that substituted bread for strict vegans - jam, that had apparently been made by Mr Nantaba out of fruit from his own garden. Effie asked to try some to Mrs Nantabas immense pleasure - Zeinab directing her smile towards Margaret as she selected a baguette from the bounty, cut and smeared it thick with her husband’s homemade marmalade for the guest she seemed to prefer if only in this single comparison. Ellie returned to the conversation she was having about
urban farming with her host, and her husband, messing lightly with Marie’s hard-won waves upon greeting her, expressed – likely not for the first time that morning – his surprise that John had gotten his little girl to engage in ball-sport.

“You’ve never tried?” John asked with seeming interest. “She is a natural talent.”

“I … haven’t played football at all in, eleven, twelve years now,” Ban answered.

“Not even five-a-side?”

Ban shook his head. Uncle Samuel spoke for him that service was hard on the knees, sentiment his former lieutenant echoed.

“Oh. I didn’t realise,” John remarked. There was something sad in his tone that reminded Effie of Percy when he watched his brother give his boss’ step-daughter a few titbits. She glanced at her boyfriend. “Maybe you can all play later on for a few minutes. Guys versus girls?”

“I love how a change of clothes has you so keen on competition,” Ellie smirked.

“That is why I keep a wardrobe in my office. You in?”

Ellie glanced at the watch. Margaret glanced at her manicure.

“I’d love to, truly, but -”

“We’uv ter go ter my sisti’s before tew much longer,” Ban said in an accent sharpened by the sudden speed of his speech.

“Afraid we would beat you?” Effie teased.

“You have me all figured out,” her friend surrendered, raising what remained of his hands in defeat.

“Maybe when we are back in London,” Marie suggested. Effie smiled, but this defeated her purpose of forcing John and Percy into the sort of activity she assumed they both privately longed for.

“Marie, I realise I never asked you, do you follow any club in particular? I can’t seem to sell Percy on Queens Park Rangers and given that you are from West London -” he tried.

Marie frowned as though she tasted something sour and shook her head. “No. I’m not really a fan of any club side. I mean, in ways I support both of Merseyside teams, but not because of my dad or the way we Brits have warped our understanding of diaspora to fit into allegiances to sporting franchisees that established themselves at around the same time the Industrial Revolution saw loads of people uprooted from their homes to seek employment in London.” This answer met with Dembe’s applause and approval.

“How can you sit here pretend that you don’t support The Foxes on exactly that basis?” Percy asked, dumbfounded.

“No, cousin-dear, that is why you support them. I didn’t even know we had a local team until we won the league and am therefore, unashamedly, a glory fan, which I will never need to defend.”

“Because Dembe comes home for the holidays,” Zeinab baited.

“Mum, I lived at home whilst I was at uni. I’m here now, I don’t,” he shook his head.

“Like, I read in the Mail,” Marie continued with a nod to Effie, “that the average worker today
moves every seven years, so it makes sense that they still want to hold on to some elements of home, or their romantic understanding of it, but I just don’t have that in West London because I would never, never want to wave a plastic Chelsea flag, Loftus Road never gave me a ‘Fever Pitch’ feel, I respect Fulham but not enough to pay Premiership pricing to see them play next year, and honestly I just never think about Brentford.”

“Cheers to that anyway,” John said.

“Right?”

“How can you be for ‘either’ Merseyside club though?” he questioned.

“Like I said, I’m not from Liverpool myself, and neither club has been hugely successful in my lifetime -”

“Istanbul – 2005!” Ellie clamoured. Ban rolled his eyes. “This is the first I’ve heard of you holding red sympathies. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this -”

“You ever check your own Twitter account?” Dembe asked, receiving a sharp look from her father.

“No, I mostly just leave that to an intern,” Ban answered honestly. “Nearly everyone in politics does. The news media makes a huge deal of it, but really it is just teens making snide comments to global audiences based on their limited understanding of the world whilst elected officials sit in back offices and debate for hours over how Kinder Eggs ought to be taxed. The nuclear threat is an invention of juvenile minds who I am sure will one day go on to write for American television, which is just pretty people and pyrotechnics.”

“I both want that to be true and I sincerely hope it isn’t,” Zeinab said with an open jaw.

“It is true,” John said. “Ban has never understood irony well enough to employ it.”

“I understand irony.”

“Um hm.”

The MP cleared his throat. “I read this morning in Effie’s paper -”

“Please leave me out of this,” Effie prayed to an indifferent God.

“-that one in every ten children born in Britain is brought up Muslim. That means, in fifteen years practicing Muslims will outnumber practicing Christians in this country, and how is that? We have been making war against these people for millennia and we’ve won every single one of them by way of damaging their counties so heavily that countless humanitarian crises see them overtaking ours. When my conservative colleagues speak of Islam conquering by the sword they don’t realise that it is us wielding it. That is irony, my friend. Or it would be, if employed in actual rhetoric.”

“And with that, I am glad that you designate your social media output to an intern,” Ellie commented through a closed-tooth smile.

“I’m not!” Ban assessed. “I need to find one who will post more about Everton a la Liverpool’s esteemed current mayor as my child -”

“How would reading online that Everton are having their most disappointing season ever make me like them more than I already do? I just have to respect LFC too because technically it was their fans who first brought continental styles to the UK, even though the Cutters turned ‘casual’ into a
“That is very astute. I would quite rather all firms have at it while wearing Italian labels,” Margaret winked. “That was actually the topic of one of my first stories for Vogue back in the mid-eighties before most of you were born,” she smiled upon the recollection. Effie was shocked at how little her imagination had to work to picture her aunt wielding a Stanley knife whilst in six-inch heels amidst hundreds of smartly dressed hooligans engaged in a brawl with a visiting firm less invested in style. She had seen such elements expressed in the woman’s character on frequent occasion – any press junction, for example, in which they both took part.

“Yea!” Maire exclaimed. “Since lad culture has so saturate the beautiful game better they make an effort to look smart pummelling each other in stadium carparks. I’m so sick of chavs.” Again, Margaret nodded her approval. Effie looked down at her sportswear in shame.

“I suppose that is better than saying it is ‘fashionable’ to support Liverpool,” Ban said eyeing Ellie.

“You know … on this topic, you don’t have as much support in Scotland as you like to imagine,” she whispered. “Celtic fans have been to Monchengladbach so often in recent years they were bound to drink in their Christmas Markets and bring back piles of regrettable hats as souvenirs. When you see people dressed not unlike yourself when we go to visit my family or Georgie it is more a show of solidarity with Brendan Rodgers than with your anti-Europe policy.”

“Honestly, forget everything I said. On Saturday I hope you both lose. I’m for QPR now,” Marie declared.

“Never heard of ‘em,” Ban dismissed.

Percy shook his head. “Mum, Dad, if you were ever wondering, this is what breakfast at mine is always like. No one mention the croissants.” Ban set his breakfast down as though suddenly conscious of having committed a faux-pas with his pasty selection.

“There is actually a fitting history here. The word ‘croissant’ is French for crescent, but the pasty itself actually originated in Austria in celebration of the defeat of the Ottomans in their siege of the city. That is also the reason we have coffee in Europe today,” Effie grinned. Looking at Percy, she added. “I went down something of a culinary rabbit hole trying to figure out how to make coffee last night.”

“Well you did a good job. I for one never would have guessed it was your first time,” Percy’s father praised.

“You should have me make hot chocolate for you. I’ve never been into coffee, but I can make cacao in the middle of a war zone.”

“Wish we had you on the Gloucester,” Lieutenant Nantaba smiled. Admiral Graves laughed.

“I heard Percy gives my aunt’s recipes to Marie – it really came in handy last night,” Dembe piped in. Zeinab sank slightly in her stool. “Maybe tonight he can show us all around the kitchen. Heaven knows I need it. Make something with potatoes so I can wow Effie with everything I learned so far this semester,” she smiled.

“You are asking too much of your poor cousin,” John said. “First, he is meant to give us all dancing lessons and then cook for us besides? No, I insist on taking you all out tonight as thanks for your hospitality.” Then sentiment caused Effie joy. Under the table, she squeezed her boyfriend’s hand. Maybe John was in fact disinterested in playing football with him, but he seemed excited at the
prospect of ballet boot-camp, which was more than just a start. She thought back to school, how John had always found reason to excuse himself from dance lessons, how he –

She stopped. She expected the world had as well but conversation continued as though no one else shared her realisation. Effie felt herself choke.

“Then tomorrow I want all four of you kids to help me with my Easter feast,” Zeinab insisted, adding with a practiced, girlish pout, “You are so skinny, so skinny Effie.”

“Thank you?”

“I worry.”

“I yo-yo,” Effie dismissed, taking no notice when Margaret nodded that this was true. She fixated on John, for years imagining that his reluctance to dance with her owed itself to her lack of skill rather than to a pain that went far deeper than stubbed toes and missteps. She could not count all the times she chastised him for his lack of interest in the activity. She wanted to apologise to him then and there, but worried that this urge, too, had more to do with how she felt about herself than any consideration that should have long existed for her first love.

“You know, when I first met you I thought you were the fakest uh-uh I ever - but you, you just tell it like it is, don’t you? No shame, I love it,” Dembe said.

“I’m a professional journalist,” Effie said of the character assessment with a straight face before forcing herself to smile. She had no shame. She, rather than John, was selfish and unfeeling and had spent too long ignorant to the needs of the people she loved. Somehow, she had to fix this.

They took a bus to the city centre after bidding the Tarletons safe travels after breakfast. Marie gave him another hug before her departure, leaving John to wonder what exactly he had done to warrant the girl’s affection, if it was indeed deserved and if he had the strength of the convictions he so freely espoused. He caught Percy’s eye in the midst of the fake-out that took the form of public transit, Margaret clearly uncomfortable in the plebeian carriage and Zeinab awaiting a complaint as an excuse to charge. The first voice of discomfort, however, escaped her own lips when the man seated in front of her lost his breakfast of flavoured milk and vodka when the bus hit a speed bump, grumbling that he had had the sense to cough his stomach contents into the plastic bag where the rest of his kiosk purchases yet awaited him. Undeterred, he stuck his hand into his own sick to retrieve an unopened bag of Prawn Flavoured Crisps, something John could not possibly fault him for, suddenly reminded of a cheap delicacy that was not on offer in the United States. Zeinab, however, had no problem finding and voicing her disapproval to Margaret’s undisguised delight. Percy fought the urge to smile, Effie looked as though she might be ill herself and the party agreed to get off at the next stop and walk the rest of the way.

The walk took longer than the half hour Dembe swore to, taking detours and stopping periodically to point out places Percy had once frequented. John, wondering all the while if he would be able to carry a few bags of crisps through customs that he might delight and then immediately disgust his cherished rival Edmund Hewlett, was barely paying attention to the landmarks of his younger brother’s life. He walked a few paces behind the rest of the party, watching on in mild amusement as Dembe and Zeinab addressed every corner of the city with heightened hyperbole, egged on by Effie’s exaggerated interest and Percy’s light blush. Margaret looked as though she was regretting
her footwear, biting her lip either as a distraction from the pain in her toes or as a caution to herself not to speak. Samuel commented that he had never been quite so far from the coast, looking upon everything that was pointed to and everything that was not with wide-eyed wonder, commenting to the brothers Nantaba occasionally on small differences in architecture John had to think were imagined.

When they at last arrived at the dance studio Percy had taken lessons at for ten years, a poster for the ballet plastered to an outer wall caught his eye. It was a Russian performance of The Nutcracker from the December past, half peeling to reveal an advertisement for an indie music festival that had preceded it. John squinted, trying to make out the names of the headlining acts, feeling he was as old as Marie estimated when he found no point of reference in mind or memory for any of the Swedes or Brazilians who sold out venues by hooking their laptops up to a massive speaker. He did not much listen to music. Lyrics he read, first in the booklets accompanying CDs, then online when such things had phased out of the consumer culture. In the past year or so, little had engaged his poetic mind and of recent he had retreated to bound volumes of the long dead masters who never failed to disappoint.

Staring again at the ballerinas without seeing them, he returned to his library, to the pictures he kept in books with notes taken on the back, things he would not dare scribble in the margins. Mary had once wanted to remove them, frame them, put them on display and he had once liked this idea. Ultimately, he decided against it. He liked remembering where he was, who he was with or who he missed terribly when first he encountered a stanza that spoke to him in a curious tone. He liked books, for they had the option of being closed. He liked to hide and to keep the option of hiding from things hindsight should have otherwise rendered insignificant. The poster. The poster he hated. It no longer served its function of announcing an event and as such was now an open assault on the memory of all passers-by. He opened his hand when he hit the wall after attempting to tear treated paper from concrete with nails chewed down well past his fingertips – a habit that had largely replaced smoking after his eldest daughter was born.

John turned to the sign for the studio entrance – lettered in both Latin and Cyrillic. Glancing down, his eyes were halted before they could hit the pavement by the small woman it took him a moment to register as Effie Gwillim, so convincing was her disguise of a young woman seriously engaged in some sport art of another. He saw that she was speaking and realised that he heard nothing of what she said, nor did he hear the sounds of city traffic and side-street commence that should have filled the morning air. He wondered how long he had stood in silence, how long he had been able to ignore the absence of sound. He reached for his hearing aid, first to feel for its presence, then to check that it was functional. In this movement Effie’s fingers found his, still raw from an ill-planned assault on Russian artists who had long since come and gone.

“John, are you okay?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” he answered.

Chapter End Notes

Notes? Oh, honey … that is half the reason I write.

Sport:

**Ibrox Stadium** is the home ground of the Glasgow Rangers. When Marie speaks of sectarian violence, she is likely referring to the local rivalry with Celtic, a proxy war for
religious and other social forms of hatred one would otherwise think modern Europe had long since phased out of. Rangers are Protestant, Celtic are Catholic.

A (fencing) piste is a metal 14 m x 1.5 m strip, the playing area for the modern sport.

‘Plastic’ Chelsea fans is a reference to some shade Rafa Benitez threw at José Mourinho when, in a CL match in 2007 at Anfield, plastic flags were distribute to the Chelsea supporters. According to the DM, Chelsea supporters are statistically the least passionate, as determined by social media presence. In the same data set in case you have any interest - Burnley, Everton, Leicester City and QPR took the top four sports, with the asterisk that QPR are additionally tied with Swansea as the most downtrodden fan base of any club in Britain. XD Like most stats I read in the DM, it sounds right and I would be likely to believe it, that is, if the paper didn’t also publish articles like the mentioned one about the Muslim population overtaking the practicing* Christian one that seem designed to get populists and nationalists up in arms over absolutely nothing.

A West London Derby is any fixture between Chelsea, Fulham, QPR and Brentford. Because these sides often play in different leagues, I’ve heard otherwise competent commentators joke that that television will try to sell anything as a ‘derby’ … but nope. It’s a real thing.

Liverpool FC won the Champions League in 2005, the final was held in Istanbul (represent!) there is a song about it. If you get all your sporting news from my notes section, they lost to Real Madrid in Kiev a few weeks back, so, I guess we can all keep singing “We won it five times …” if we had any mind to.

Everton’s hooligan firm The Country Road Cutters may not have originated the casual subculture discussed in the text, but they are the best know example of it. I like to imagine Mags engaged in street violence as a matter of high-minded principal. Not that she is ‘for’ Everton, just against the tracksuits won by The Headhunters, Red Army, Bushwackers, etc. I could honestly write a one-shot about this. Don’t tempt me.

Brendan Rodgers is the current trainer of the aforementioned Celtic Glasgow and despite the success he has found at that club, a shameless inventor of his own mythology. He likes telling local papers about the relationships he has established with supporters in exacting detail that often gets disputed as being entirely fictitious. This is probably my favourite thing about the man.

Food:

The story Effie relays on the origin of croissants is a legend, perhaps invented by a Parisian baker in the early twentieth century, which is where the earliest recipe we have for the pastry comes from.

Prawns Flavoured Crisps are superlative to any other food stuff you have ever had.

And that is it for me! I hope you enjoyed. Let me know your thoughts if you have a mind to do so.

Up Next: Effie and John have it out and … sounds weird, but I kind of want to check in with Mary Anne.
Chapter Summary

Effie oversteps in an attempt to help John make peace with his personal history and current predicament after the two spend a long while conversing over a pint. Elsewhere, Marie takes temporary solace and strength in things left unspoken, Mary struggles with the concept of goodbye and Mary Anne can’t leave soon enough for her own liking.

Chapter Notes

Hey lovelies! I don’t have that much to say by way of introducing this chapter which may well serve as the closest to ‘fluff’ this pen has ever approached. Applause are in order? Maybe not … I still have a few warnings: fake news, day drinking, flirting exes, and developmental disabilities as concerned with the question of consent. Yikes. Also – after over two years of talking about Liverpool, I have finally set a scene in that fair city. I know. I can’t believe it either.

Still with me, then? Brilliant. As always, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is so boring,” the younger of the two brothers mumbled for what felt the hundredth time though in truth it was the merely twenty-eight refrain of this tired phrase.

“I told you it would be for you,” his sibling spat, not bothering to offer an alternative of where the boy might look for amusement within these walls when he again begged him to leave with a sharp, short, “Just go away. I didn’t want you coming to begin with.”

“And do what?” Rhys Wessex whined. He was twelve years old, three behind the sibling to whom he had all but attached himself to upon beginning secondary school the previous semester. Billy did not bother to respond. He did not so much as look in his younger brother’s direction, though, Marie noted as she watched him study to board, his expression told of a hatred only siblings could share.

Ordinarily, their incessant bickering would have bothered her, but early on this particular Friday afternoon, it played to her advantage. Rhys, who had neither interest nor skill in strategy, had taken out one of Billy’s armies before ceding his Asian territories to her when she scored a devastating and decisive victory near Kuwait. The pre-teen had not wanted to continue playing afterwards, which was just as well as he had effectively shown himself out in a few bad rolls. Billy currently had Arthur’s left flank cornered, something their school mate was keen to ignore, for, at present, he was focusing most of his strength and all of his attention on the Imogen, whom they had all only just met.

Marie had no hopes of winning the war herself, but she could do well to watch her immediate enemies suffer a series of personal humiliations in their struggle for military dominance. She crushed her hand around a piece that was no longer in play until the pressure stung.

Imogen was in her mid-twenties. She had bony shoulders and mousy brown hair that nearly reached
them, puffy eyes partially concealed by the bangs she was trying to grow out. She would not have been remarkable if judged solely on her own physical attributes, but she had the distinct advantage of sitting at the same table as someone against whom she was beautiful-by-comparison. Marie Robinson tried her best to keep her head down, thinking if she did so she would afford the others less of an opportunity to notice her wide pores and the spots that seemed to double with each glimpse she was brave enough to hazard of herself in the mirror. Normally, Marie considered, she was only this ugly when under the stress of revising for an important exam or training for a tournament that would determine her national ranking. Lately however, she did her best to avoid her reflection wherever it occurred, paying special attention to the soap in her hands when she washed them, avoiding the side window of the car at certain hours when the rising or setting sun would force her own face upon her - translucent against the trees and powerlines she rode past. She let the screen on her phone fully illuminate before bringing it into eye-view, afraid of the bumps under her skin that seemed even more striking against a black backdrop. She bowed her chin closer to her chest as Imogen spoke. Imogen, who had a few freckles on the bridge of her nose which she did not think to conceal. She did not need make-up. Not like Marie did. Not that, in her own case, it did much to assist.

She had complained about Arthur to Effie earlier that morning, stating that when she wore make-up, he thought it was for his benefit. Now, she considered that maybe it was, at least in part. She hated herself for succumbing to societal pressures so much that she manged to hate her classmate a bit more for it, too. He was oblivious and she was invisible. When they kissed, she noted, he always closed his eyes.

“More coffee?” Imogen asked, her voice sounding of music and laughter, of fairy lights and star filled nights, of various other charms so monopolised by fiction that she seemed herself a fantasy. She advanced with her roll and Arthur fell back into an attacking retreat. Marie smiled. On his next turn, Billy, surely, would take out their sort-of-friend’s second army, suffering considerable casualties in the process. Only then would Marie move into Eastern Europe to conquer her cousin. For now, she would just wait them all out.

“Sure,” Ethan replied, though he sounded anything but. It was his turn and he rose without rolling. Thus far, his efforts not to engage looked to be paying off. An hour in, Ethan had yet to suffer a single pitched battle, and for a moment Marie entertained the idea that this might well be a conscious act of brilliance. Since they first sat down at a corner table in a Somali-run café in the heart of Toxteth with its every inner wall covered in boxed games of all sorts, Ethan had studied his paternal uncle’s phone with such intent that no one would suspect –

No, she decided when her eldest cousin again asked a question about the engine of the old Escort Marie could neither answer nor fully understand. He was just a nerd.

She had not expected to see Ethan until the evening and had not known that he was seeing anyone in serious enough sense to invite them to join the mêlée that was the Tarleton Easter table. Curiosity still unsatisfied, the young man, frowning, followed his date back to the bar where the rest of their party had found them an hour before, ordered, and then used his tongue to again greet the one partings his lips, pulling his new girlfriend into a passionate embrace. Rhys commented that it was gross. Arthur returned his forlorn gaze from the happy couple back to his phone. There was no notification light, and he seemed ready to comment on this before Billy interrupted to Marie’s chagrin, “You don’t get to say anything about Kitty. You know that, right?”

She kicked at her cousin from beneath the table. He was betraying their unspoken agreement and likely breaking her battle formation in the process. Arthur, smitten, seemed absent of strategy at present, and for reasons to which she would find no way of voicing should anyone have the mind to inquire into them, Marie could not let him win. Not again, and certainly, not today. The morning had put her in a foul mood.
Her father had dropped her off at the docks a few minutes before Arthur’s ferry arrived from Dublin, parking and stepping out of the old Escort to greet his nephews and their bodyguard jovially, joking as he asked how they came on the idea of spending any part of the long weekend playing at failed foreign relations. “It is like a duller version of Dungeons and Dragons, ‘innit?” Ban squinted. Rhys scoffed, kicked at some of the gravel that looked as though it had been providing a base amusement for bored feet for some time now and answered that his other option was hanging out on his aunts’ horse farm and participating in the egg hunt the stables were hosting for the children enrolled in riding lessons, many of whom had physical, mental, and developmental handicaps and disabilities. He phrased this, however, in language her father refused to tolerate and thus instantly found himself the target of a pointed lecture, itself seeming a tangent of the larger family discussion of late.

Marie’s aunt Isabelle, whom everyone called Izzie, was eight months pregnant. Unwed, this would have been a scandal all unto itself were it not for the more immediate questions that had arisen with her condition. Izzie had Down Syndrome, which led her sister and primary caregiver to imagine that she had neither sexuality nor say. Aunt Emma, who was called Emmie by her six siblings, had responded by firing the stable boy her little sister had fallen in love with, accusing him of statutory rape. She had wanted Izzie to abort the ill-gotten offspring, Izzie refused, responding in a regurgitation of their late father’s pro-life rhetoric when it occurred to her that Emmie was deaf to any declaration of love. Their mother, who processed both medical and legal power of attorney for her youngest daughter, attempted to solve the dispute by allowing the pregnancy to continue but beginning a court process to disallow the child’s father any contact or custody. He had since opened a counter suit, leading a number of Tarletons to hold tighter to their assumption that the young man’s only interest in Izzie was her inheritance. Given the current status of the municipal court, this would first be resolved by a judge shortly before the child entered primary school. The problem, Marie recognised, was the meantime. A number of her father’s siblings had begun using language around the affair that would have been met with corporal punishment when they were younger. Ban Tarleton, rarely given to self-censorship had, insofar as she knew, never referred to anyone as being ‘retarded’ and was positively outraged that such would be said in reference to his little sister, especially from within the family proper.

And so, in the late morning, in public, in full view of strangers with cell phones, on a holiday weekend where the press was otherwise slow and the politic positively stagnant, the conservative MP chastised his nephew for the slur - louder and angrier than Marie had ever before seen him. Before he finished, Rhys was in tears. Before he finished, she felt her phone buzz in the back pocket of her mini shorts with what could only be a breaking news notification.

There were enough nightmare narratives that could come from the Riverside representative screaming over matters that sounded much like social justice mantras without the full frame of focus. As it happened, however, her cousin was a child of colour, confusing the situation in the eyes of every internet commentator. Before her father had finished, his strong warning against hurtful language had been branded as hate speech against a minority population and the disabled to whose defence he had risen. Marie glared at everyone in the gathered crowed, hating them for engaging in the sort of mindless scrutiny that they themselves would never know. They were the real half-wits, she thought. She wouldn’t say as much aloud. Unlike Rhys, she knew better than to use such words.

She suspected the no one’s smart phone caught her father kneeling to embrace his nephew after his too-strong caution had brought the boy to tears, nor did anyone care about the apology that followed on both sides. A look from Billy informed her that such had been happening between various extended relations at the farm house all morning. But this was in public and he seemed to anticipate Tuesday’s homeroom with dread.

As she watched the ferry approach, Marie realized her own fears were far more immediate. Her mother, whose hatred of her ex’s entire family was mutual and more than well documented, was
coming into the chaos to collect. Her suggestion that they meet up over Easter had had nothing to do with her clinic being in the area. Marie inhaled deeply, remembering that her mother had once chosen this particular centre on the grounds that Ban had property in Merseyside and an obligation to spend fifty-one percent of his time within his constituency. He never visited the woman whom he had loved for half his life. Neither did Marie. But then, her mother rarely extended a direct invitation.

When Arthur arrived to meet them, Ban announced that the boy’s company was punishment enough after begrudgingly shaking the hand that had been offered insofar as he was capable. Arthur smirked, which was as close as he usually came to a smile. Angry at her father for being so blind as to fall into every personal and profession trap the weekend had given him, Marie kissed her classmate on the cheek in greeting and strode proudly out of the carpark without bidding her father farewell. She glimpsed him in traffic a few blocks later looking sullen and stricken. He did not see her.

During their walk, Billy and Rhys confirmed all of Marie’s silenced fears about her extended family’s interpersonal conduct; anger spilling into the same proxy wars that were always waged under censorship – sport, projected stock prices, the same films they had been watching for decades at every multiday gettogether.

“Out of curiosity, ‘Braveheart’ or ‘The Patriot’?” Arthur asked to three blank expressions. “Which Mel Gibson film does your family take the most issue with given its history?” he tried to clarify.

“Neither?” Billy squinted.

“Ellie broke with history altogether after she surrendered her right to wear her family’s plaid when she married my dad without the Queen’s Instrument of Consent,” Marie explained before questioning what a film about the American Revolution had to do with her family. “I’ve never actually seen it.”

“Somehow I am not surprised,” Arthur murmured.

“Is it a RomCom? Because my dad takes serious umbrage with the actor’s attempts in that area.”

“We all do, I think,” Billy laughed. “Last night we were watching ‘What Women Want’ and you’d have thought England were playing giving how much cursing was directed towards the telly.”

“Aw! Seriously? And I missed it?” Marie whined.

“We thought you guys were coming,” Billy shrugged. “Oh! Boots, that reminds me, I stole something for you.”

“Can you refrain from -” Arthur stopped short when Billy handed him a Card Against Humanity with his least favourite politician’s name printed on it.

“It may be too soon for this, but I think I love you,” the Dubliner grinned at his new prized possession before slipping it into his own wallet. Marie, although slightly annoyed at the existence of such an insult, offered to forward her friend all of the pictures she had been sent of the thing at play the afternoon prior. She struggled to switch out her SIM-card for her father’s as they walked the last few blocks to the café they had found on Google.

Ban Tarleton had a few missed calls and texts, all of which were work-related and therefore of little immediate interest to anyone. Marie sent Arthur the pictures as soon as she located them. He laughed. Then frowned. Kitty, he informed to a chorus of groans, still hadn’t called. His mother, however, was furious with him and he asked if his friends were of the disposition to put money on the game they were readying to play, explaining that he needed to raise enough cash to rent a room
for the evening, assuming it was his to win.

“I smashed one of my violins on the side of Kitty’s building after her brother refused to let me up to
see her last night, my mum’s just gotten word,” he explained with little inflection.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Billy demanded.

“No loss to the school orchestra,” Marie commented to herself as she opened the door to the café.

Inside, amongst the hipsters and displaced asylum seekers, they came upon a smartly dressed couple
seated at the bar, waiting on a billiards table to become available. The greetings that followed were
more surprised than sincere. Ethan explained that he had met Imogen at a Formula 1 race in Dubai. She
was employed by the Foreign Office, in what capacity he did not find it worthwhile to specify,
though, it would seem from her later strategy, her work might well have something to do with
presenting military options when diplomacy failed. Ethan himself was a useless party boy who had
been friends with the sheik who owned the track since attending boarding school with the man in
some small, secluded town in Switzerland that lent its name to economics and excess each winter.
Ethan’s father was, as the eldest son of a great family, its unofficial -sometimes disputed- patriarch,
his mother was an Italian auto heiress whose family owned a sporting outfit in Turin by extension
with whom the Tarletons often did business. For his part, Ethan the heir found solace from the
expectations placed on him by way of heritage by watching cars speed past at every opportunity and
had escaped to Toxteth with his girlfriend the prior evening to take part in an illegal drag race on a
downtrodden estate. This appeared to be a common enough occurrence for him giving that he knew
the entire staff of this nearby café by name. Marie sorely hoped he had the sense to keep at least the
local half of his hyphenated surname a secret. Somehow, she doubted it when he spoke her fathers,
stating that he had relieved the MP’s minifridge of microbrew the night prior and that filter coffee and
fatty meats provided the perfect cure for a light hangover. He offered to buy the kids breakfast and
whatever they wanted by way of drink. They found a corner table near the still-occupied billiards
where Marie began to explain the events that kept her in Leicester yesterday.

She did not get very far.

Upon hearing the story of their breakdown, Ethan expressed disappointment that she hadn’t put it up
on Snapchat, saying that he would be interested in looking at the engine later. He would surely go
into business or politics or some unholy assimilation of both like everyone else to whom he was
related, but his love was motor sport and as such the game progressed largely without him. Ethan
kept voicing ideas on how to upgrade the four-door sedan for speed in the limited window the
weekend allowed him. Imogen shared this hobby and offered a few suggestions, but otherwise did
not have much to say leaving Arthur to project whatever his current fancy was upon her and
allowing Marie to exploit this distraction. It seemed that none of her cousins had any great interest of
relieving the boy Ethan failed to recognise as a rival of his fifty quid.

“How can I have anything to say? Kitty isn’t speaking to me,” Arthur sighed with staged sadness.

“You are drooling over my cousin’s girlfriend, you don’t get to cry about yours.”

Marie shot Billy a dark look. He raised his arms in confusion. The next few minutes played out
exactly as she feared they would. Arthur sat in silence as he examined the game pieces, eventually
inquiring about Billy’s southern border. Rhys looked ready to leave and Marie had half a mind to
join him. The little boy rose from his chair but returned to it immediately, seeing happy couple
approach with a plate of nachos along with the coffee and cola that had been requested. The
towering platter looked as delicious as tortilla chips thrown into the microwave with a few Kraft
singles and a scattering of soggy, pickled jalapeno slices possibly could, which was to say, Marie
wished she had not eaten quite so much at breakfast. Billy thanked the pair kindly. Rhys simply
nodded, his mother already full. Arthur refused the offer as politely as one could whilst looking upon the plate with utter disgust and distain.

“The only thing I have ever seen you eat are those white-bread sandwiches you get in an open-faced refrigerator at a kiosk,” Marie said, trusting herself a chip out of basic manners.

“I know what I am about,” her friend quite nearly smiled back.

Billy rolled and advanced upon the sixth-former’s exposed flank, finding himself beaten back a round later. She had expected him to do as much but found herself annoyed at her cousin’s lack of foresight all the same.

They had begun playing games like these two years before. In a roundabout way, it was Kitty Pakenham’s fault as all things had a way of seeming. Billy had been hiding in homeroom with the one kid not likely to comment on a picture of his mum on page six of a yellow paper no one at school admitted to reading unless there was something to be found in it with which to torture a classmate. Aunt Charlotte, whom no one called Charlie - and had not even when the picture of her in a sport bra embracing the equally beautiful future duchess consort when they both wore the national colours in the under-20s had been taken - was ‘right fit’ and thus prompted the gentlemen whom an undergarment had turned into proper lads to expand upon what they would do to her if afforded the opportunity. Marie, who was otherwise used to lewd remarks on count of who her mother was, had punched a boy for saying ‘it is not as though she can run away, is it?’ and was therefore herself hiding from whatever punishment a broken nose warranted in the eyes of the governors. She offered Billy a few words of wisdom she would have done better to remember herself minutes earlier, ‘Don’t let it get to you’ and ‘This will all blow over.’ Her best friend Susan Bertie, who, by contrast, welcomed such comments upon herself via her impressive social media presence had more sage advice, ‘Throw an absolute rager at yours and profit from your mum’s sex-symbol status as long as it lasts, obvs.’ Overhearing, Arthur looked up and asked what he might say to a girl he more than fancied. Susan demanded his phone and began writing Kitty absolute filth that saw a response of a few selfies which, in short time, had both girls bemoaning their own cup sizes, questioning Arthur how much of ‘Kitty’s titties’ were, in fact, padding. ‘Don’t let it get to you,’ Billy repeated to the boy they had forced their friendship upon, ‘this will all blow over.’

With that, Arthur had returned to ignoring them, trying to figure out a seating arrangement his upcoming internship had placed him in charge of, which Marie, then in need of her own distractions, was able to use her organisational talents to address - researching and writing up colour coded notes on each of the attendees that later proved useful. In turn, Arthur used his position at the embassy to sort out the larger problem she was having insofar as it could be solved from a public-school basement. Though far from friends, they shared an understanding that what they had undertaken in one another’s names was more interesting than the classes they missed in the process. By the time they sat detention together, they each had one another’s numbers and within the month were willing engaged in something as similar as could be found without a missing American senator to look for.

First, they had played from the selection of strategy games available in the cupboard in homeroom, none of which were of any interest to the larger student body. In this time, they exchanged little beyond short comments directed at one another’s deficits. By the following semester however, the four all shared at least one club, sport or elective class, meeting on the weekends to do homework or whatever else came to mind – usually at Susan’s, for Arthur was as poor of a host as he was guest, Billy had a younger brother and sister who never left him alone, and Marie’s father, who made it a habit of never leaving it to question where anyone stood with him, quite plainly had no respect for certain members of their party for reasons which he oddly refused to elaborate on.

Then she and Arthur kissed and Marie understood her father’s every misgiving about the boy.
There was no discussion around it, even when it happened for a second time outside of school and outside of the boredom that came with secondary education. When a snowstorm hit and she was warming herself by his fire, he tried with ‘you’re beautiful’ and Marie found herself wishing long afterwards that he was as eloquent as Susan made him seem in the texts she still sent his girlfriend in Ireland. Marie wished that he had never spoken at all, that he had not crossed that line or made her aware of all of the others that touch could transverse. She pitied Kitty and envied her all at once and worried that this was what it was to fancy a boy. Finding no audience for her fears, Marie suffered and silenced them, wondering how long it would take to go back to just being mates and if they ever could. She had never been kissed before and somehow doubted she was worthy of the sentiment. It was clear he did not like her, not really. Not with girls like Imogen or Susan or Harriet or Olivia or Rachel or Heather or Yasmin or blood Kitty Pakenham existing to remind her how very little she had in her arsenal.

At least she was decent enough at war games that Arthur would be forced to retire to Dublin in the evening. She did not want him in Liverpool. He was meant to be her friend and yet in the two hours that had elapsed since meeting up at the ferry he had not once asked her how she was.

“Marie,” Ethan said.

“Oh, is it my turn?” she blinked, wondering how long she had been staring at the board without making a move.

“No, your phone.”

Marie blinked. She did not recognise the ring tone and then remembered she was being forced to use her father’s and that she hadn’t changed the SIM card back yet. She picked it up off the table and saw a picture of her mother on display, back from when the device had presumably first been purchased, before she had taken ill, or at least, before they had known it. It was the kind of candid photo she hated her father for taking. Mary was blowing bubbles with Marie on a clear autumn day, the leaves taking on colour as theirs began to pale beneath jackets and scarves. She wanted to remember her mum this way. She didn’t want to talk to her.

But remembering what John Graves Simcoe had told her that morning, Marie swiped to answer.

Effie Gwillim was not especially keen on scotch. In truth, she would rather a dry white, or, given the hour, chocolate topped with marshmallows, whipping cream and any number of colourful, sweet-tasting aesthetics, but John looked as though he could make good use of something harder than it was hot and so she placed her order in a show of solidarity.

“Just a coffee,” he said to the waiter. She shot him a glare. Effie Gwillim had made it up three flights of stairs to her boyfriend’s former dance studio, greeted his old instructor whose limited English met well with her absence of breath, taken a gulp of not-quite cooled water from a cone shaped cup, then another, before she realised that John was no longer a member of their party. She asked around to shrugs and blank stares, hastening down the stairwell at double-speed as it became clear her unspoken fears were warranted. She had opened the door and glanced up and down the street. Seeing nothing, she stepped outside to find John losing in a one-sided confrontation with a wall.

They had walked for a few minutes in silence, Effie wondering all the while if it was harder for her to hear the cars and commerce without the benefit of conversation, or for John who seemed deaf to
all of it. He had learned to conceal his condition well before their first interaction, or he had not and had long relied on the impartiality of the student body to keep his secrets. In a group setting, he could now fool anyone it seemed, even whilst wearing his hearing aid, even seated with those who knew the condition to be partially psychosomatic. His father had been the target of a roadside bombing in Pakistan when he was ten years old, John alone had survived the attack, albeit whilst sustaining heavy damage to his hearing. All the same, the doctors were all of the professional opinion that this was something he would grow out of. He had not, and neither had his voice. The first time they spoke, Effie was taken slightly aback by his pitch. She later learned that he got by largely by lip reading insofar as one could. John was too concentrated without the benefit of context. He never blinked, something that created a certain chill in his pale blue eyes. Effie had seen an improvement recently, that, or she simply had not been looking close enough. She wondered how long this had lasted, how much of it was her fault. She said nothing. She felt she had no right.

She pulled him into the first bar they found, a small, dimly lit corner pub, empty but for the barman, a supplier with whom he was discussing inventory, and a few scattered students attending to coursework with alcohol or caffeine, each according to taste. There was a familiarity to it though Effie rarely frequented such establishments. It was the way light struggled though the old windows, the particles of dust it displayed in suspension when it found enough strength. It was the heavy wooden tables and chairs, none of which belonged to a set but created a singular harmony all the same. It was the warm air that carried the scent of all that was being consumed, beer and baked-goods, coffee and wax candles and the emptied liquor bottles that held them. John made a loose comment about a tavern in Setauket she had been surprised to learn he still frequented as they found a seat in the corner. Effie sent a text to Percy, letting him know that she found John, but that it might be a while.

Fifteen minutes had since passed. He had yet to write anything in response. Effie tried to glance again at her phone, halting her eyes before they found the device in her hand, remembering how much John let himself be bothered by this middle-class lapse in etiquette. No one she knew in the city went five minutes without work-related correspondence, regardless of setting. Maybe things were different in the colonies. Maybe they now lived under different sets of norms.

“It is … not yet eleven,” John shrugged, returning the slightly sticky, laminated drink menu to a slit in a wooden block from which he had taken it after reading it over once more.

“I know,” Effie replied, admitting, “that is why I settled on Johnny Black. I bloody hate it.”

“I don’t follow. Is this some industry-specific practice?” her ex asked with what seemed genuine interest, romanticising, “Cigars and scotch … badly lit rooms and articles that will change the course of history when they go to print?”

“Talbot, my deputy editor, put Stormi Webster on the cover in my absence. I think we are approaching revolution,” Effie remarked dryly, fighting the smile that threatened her lips.

“I have no idea who that is,” John confessed.

“Kylie Jenner’s new baby.”

“Who?”

“You should read my paper,” Effie smarted. “The whiskey … that is a Hewlett trick. They drink it slowly in keeping with custom, holding their wits while their company becomes comparatively loose lipped.”

John sighed and leaned back in his chair. “You’ve never had a proper session with Edmund then.”
“Is that what they call integration?”

“Integration? I don’t know if I should take offence,” he frowned. “We Brits *invented* getting shitfaced.”

“And the coffee?”

“That I will give you,” he paused, a smile he was hesitant to share turning his cheeks a pale pink. “When Mary and I moved in together she was pregnant and could not stand the smell, I suddenly had so much herbal tea at home that I started ordering coffee when I went out like everyone else in the city for a bit of variation. It kind of stuck,” he stopped, pivoting back to the present. “You can order something else, you know.”

“No.”

“Do you want me to? A cacao?” John moved to rise as though he meant to intercept the approaching server with an adjusted request. Effie motioned for him to remain seated.

“I’m worried that I’d be too reminded on our school days,” Effie said, thanking the server, reminiscing all the same over sneaking into corner cafés, cuddled up with a warm beverage and the boy John had once been. “We were horrible to each other, weren’t we?” she asked with a hesitation she could not hide.

“You and Ellie were horrible to each other. You and I were young and in love.”

Effie lifted the tumbler to her lips, cringing as the earth like taste of ethanol met with Scottish smoke at the tip of her tongue. John signalled to the waiter and requested a hot chocolate. He took the glass from her hand and poured the remainder into his coffee with an unexpected elegance that made her feel all the more childish.

“Better?” he smiled.

Effie swallowed. “I think I am selfish.”

“Why is that?”

“You have always been this way. You have always made small – sometimes admittedly unwelcome – demonstrations of kindness and basic human decency and I’ve never done anything to thank you or reciprocate or even just show my … John,” she prattled, finding herself on the verge of tears, “I’m worried that I don’t know how to care about people. About you and -”

“You’ve lost me,” he frowned. “Effie, where is this coming from?”

“I was thinking yesterday on every ill I ever considered myself to suffer back when we were at school together, how you wouldn’t dance with me, how you shut me out whenever something slightly out of our routine entered the schedule – Romeo and Juliette, which I forced you into, a big sporting fixture, anything where you anticipated playing to a crowd and I … I let it get me so angry, now, as I did then,” she confessed. “I’ve spent the past day tallying every sin I felt I could name, how you left me feeling left out, unwanted or unwelcome, without once trying to imagine these incidents from your perspective. Years later, lifetimes even, I’ve managed to hold my feelings against you, as though you could be faulted with – never mind. At breakfast I realised that all this time, literally all this time I’ve instead been unfair to you, entirely insensitive. Dancing reminds you of your mother, doesn’t it? It is no wonder you -”

“Effie, that is in no way your fault,” John broke, his long, calloused fingers finding her small hand.
She pulled herself back, crossing her arms to her chest.

“I know but -”

“I imagine I was a dick,” John sighed, “regardless if I intended to be or not. I have no reason to lie to you, sometimes I let my anger get the better of me as well. I couldn’t hear the music when we were dancing, I am likely every bit as much to blame for and missteps as you are if not more so. I didn’t know during the school play when to say my lines and certain scenes were blocked as such that I had to gauge when to speak based on the expression of the audience, on this count I was keeping in my head about how long it took everyone else to say theirs in rehearsal, knowing that everyone’s grade for the semester was largely determinant on my performance.”

“I know, I know, and John I am so -”

“Don’t be. I put it on you to keep the secret of my hearing from nearly the entire student population. That was unfair. Effie, I resent nothing, how could I? You gave me the semblance of being normal, of fitting in, of all of these abstracts that so many realities of my existence would have otherwise made impossible.”

“I wasn’t the only one.”

“Am I horrible to admit that I saw it that way at the time?”

“No. We were young and in love.”

“And now?” he tried to smile.

“We are old and bad at commitment, both.”

“You seem to be doing well there.”

“I think Percy’s parents hate me.”

“I know Mary’s people hate me.”

Effie nodded, imagining the woman who had replaced her. She had met Mary Woodhull all of once and had barely afforded her any consideration. At the time, she had only known the woman as one of Anna Strong’s bridesmaids, not realising the role she had played in world affairs or knowing of the affair she was having with John. They had been cordial, nothing more. Later, however, when she learned that the little red head had stolen John’s heart, she was not surprised. Effie Gwillim owed much of what she now had to Mary Woodhull. Certainly, she owed her more than to steal her long-term domestic partner to her own sordid doubts. “Am I the reason you two aren’t married?” she asked. “I would really hate to be -”

John snorted back a laugh. “In spite of my earlier show of hostilities, I’m not hung up on you.”

“Glad to hear.”

“Are you hung up on me?” he considered slowly, absent of the judgement she had heard when Zeinab and Dembe danced around the same question, having already arrived at their answer. It made it impossible to like either now, hard as she was trying. Effie gave John a hard look.

“Rude,” she scoffed.

“Hm?” John pouted slightly.
“God, stop, no. You gross!” She felt everything fall from her lips all at once; how she first saw Percy in Ellie Hewlett’s hospital room, how nervous she felt in the first few hours of their flight over the Atlantic, how calm he was in correcting her initial misconceptions, her own almost irrational anger when she discovered his true place on the cartel boss’ chessboard. Effie had hoped to stop Percy from enacting the vengeance the princess promised upon those she held responsible for her lover’s death. She had not named John in her initial tirade and Effie, suspecting the two of being related, had thus been thrilled at the idea of helping the Simcoes find solace in what was then thought to be lost. She did not wonder now that so many people had misread the situation so entirely. She did not wonder that things had so ended that little could exist between them. She blamed Ellie, and then, she didn’t. Had Percy not remained in her employ, Effie would have never had the chance to know him outside of a short conflict of which she should have never made herself part.

And what a romance it was! Percy made her feel special, safe and self-assured. He was shy, sweet and far smarter than most men she knew. He neither craved her wealth nor let himself feel intimidated by it. “I like myself better when he is around,” she confessed. “Is that wrong to say?”

“No. I like you better, too,” John teased.

“Shut up!”

“I didn’t want to. I wanted to hate you both.”

“Because it is easier?” she asked.

“No, because he has a degree in archelogy and ancient history.”

“What?”

“Can you keep a secret?” he leaned in.

“I edit a tabloid.”

“Yea … I’m not really sure how to take that.”


“I might have pursued a similar path had I a better concept of natural sciences.”

“I don’t know … all roads lead to Rome. After all, you still both wound up working for the Hewletts, with or without an A level in biochem,” she teased.

“You are unbelievable,” he shook his head. “Just … keep that from Edmund, alright?”

“I’m pretty sure he knows both that he has partial ownership of the company whose finances you manage and that science isn’t your strong suit.”

“Yes, but he doesn’t know that I know I can’t keep up with him when he speaks of such things.”

“I feel you.” The two shared a chuckle.

“Cheers.”

“Can I ask you something both dumb and deeply personal?” she asked after finishing her chocolate, the majority of which had descended to the bottom of the mug to be taken in one final sip. Effie knew that it would from experience. She frowned at the last dark brown notes left to streak the base
and inner sides on the mug, wondering why she always disregarded her spoon after devouring the decorations.

“By all means.”

“Mary Anne and Ellie both have these terribly encompassing relationship contracts - is that normal? Since Mary is a lawyer, did she make you sign anything of the sort? My friends accuse me of some kind of insensitivity, that in addition to not protecting my own assets I give Percy no say in our … undertakings,” she laughed, “is that the legal term?”

“I wouldn’t know, no, no we have nothing like that. We were a lucky accident. Mary and I. Ellie and Mary Anne and both … how do I put it?”

“Deeply paranoid?” she tried.

“Sounds right. Could apply to any of us though,” his shoulders and expression fell suddenly. “Two years, three kids, I still haven’t proposed and I don’t know that I would be in the right to.”

“But you love her, don’t you?” Effie bit her lower lip.

“Deeply. That is my hang up,” he paused. “With everything going on right now, with out case going to trial, with how fucking close she and her ex have gotten post break up -”

“Oh no, you don’t think- from what Ban has told me about Abe he is … I don’t think he is interested in woman, in a sexual sort of way, I-” Effie began to ramble.

John’s eyes widened in amusement. “Oh my God, you can’t say ‘homosexual’, can you?”

“I don’t talk about sex!” she hissed. “At all! Mine or anyone else’s. I just feel weird about it, always have, I feel weirder now that I am almost thirty, that all of my friends who are going to have kids already do and that everyone is comfortable talking about what they like and what they don’t with people other than their partners .”

“I hope that never changes.”

“Why?”

“There are so many areas I know I can’t compare to Percy in, let me imagine that I am at least as good in bed.”

Effie felt her jaw fall as she blinked several times in quick succession. “I … I try not to compare, it is different, but then I am different and – can we not talk about this? Or do we need to talk about this? Does it, are you -”

“I’m glad you are happy. Effie, forgive me, I just wanted to see if I could still get you railed up over absolutely nothing,” John laughed. Effie’s cheeks grew redder still, though not from something as simple as embarrassment.

“It isn’t nothing,” she cautioned.

“No, of course not.”

“No – I meant,” she stopped when he laughed again.

“How long have we been friends, John?”
“Fifteen years? Sixteen?”

“No, we weren’t always, were we? We were ‘young and in love’ and then we were ‘engaged to be wed’ and then we were ‘over’ – how long have we been ‘friends’?” she inquired.

“Somewhere between twenty minutes and two years then,” he offered.

“Do you think it is harder? Ellie and Ban were friends for twenty years and married without going on a single date, and sometimes we will be hanging out and they are so,” she squinted, knowing how ridiculous she sounded, “like I will want to say ‘you guys would make such a cute couple, how are you not going out?’ and … do you know what I mean? It is like, at the same time and with the same inflection … ‘how are you two possibly married? – you are meant to be frenemies’” she paused, coming to her point. “Do you think people look at us in the same way and wonder how we could possibly be friends?”

“People or Percy?” John clarified. Effie glanced at her phone. Her boyfriend had yet to reply to her text.

“People,” she said a little too sharply. “Same as with you and Mary and Abe.”

“No.”

“I mean it. I need you on my side and I think Mary may need her ex in the same way and you may just need to accept that.”

At this John stiffened and rolled his eyes. Lifting his hand to grab the waiter’s attention, he said, “Put that way, I think I need a real drink.”

Mary closed her eyes when she felt a soft kiss grace the back of her bare neck. Eyes shut, she could still see the two trees surrounded by seasonal flowers on the pristine green lawn which she had spent seven years in total doing yoga on the mornings when she was strong enough to stand. She removed her headphone and turned to meet the lips of a wrong time had set right.

“What is it?” her lover asked softly.

“I don’t want to approach them with art, but maybe I ought. Write a poem, a song, a eulogy.”

“Who?”

“The trees, the view from my sickbed, the eternity it seemed to promise. I never imagined for a moment that I would miss this place, but I am struck with the idea that I will never see it again. No,” she self-corrected as she continued to muse, “‘see’ is wrong. I’m not sure that I ever ‘saw’ this picture until pausing to look back. I felt it, the breeze on my cheeks, the softness of the grass under my step. There are twigs on normal lawns, small stones, a certain roughness to nature - the difference, I suppose between life and death. No, I don’t think I shall miss the clinic, I’ll miss the idea that at some point I will likely return. In ways, I have for months.”

“If you are having second thoughts …” Thomas said with a hope that hurt.

“I’m not. This isn’t life, it is a pleasant purgatory. But all goodbyes are hard.”
“We’ve barely said hello.”

“Take me somewhere that will give me something to talk about,” she smiled sweetly.

The two had met years before, and many had passed between ‘I will’ and ‘I want.’

She had been in her first semester at university, five years after obtaining her A-levels, still younger than most of her classmates. He was pursuing an MBA and editing the campus’ prestigious, circulated Business Review when they sat first sat down for coffee, to chat over how her label was suing her for a third album, how writing and recording had nothing to do with her immediate plans.

Immediately, or so the narrative of memory informed, she had found herself in his student housing, making love before making an earnest attempt to escape the vicarious nature of her existence - everyone wishing for her looks and life whilst Mary prayed for a moment’s reprieve from microphones and flashing lights, from red carpets that lead no where but felt endless when one was made to walk in stilettos, toes numb, grace staged.

She had married Thomas in secret before the semester’s end. Their domestic life lasted until the realities of the recession saw him redundant and forced her to drop out of school and return to recording. The two had been separated for six weeks when she discovered she was pregnant. They had not seen one another since Thomas worked out that it was possible though improbable for her child to also be his.

Now - regardless of the paternity test - Marie never would be. That much had long been seen to.

Mary had asked for a divorce before her daughter could crawl, Thomas had answered with a demand for alimony. They were both too hurt to speak and so the conversation was never furthered, not even amongst their individual solicitors. There were times in the years that followed that she was glad for him, glad that threats time should have rendered empty still held enough weight that she would never have to answer her lover with an honest ‘no’.

They could not marry, she was married and could not get a divorce.

No.

They could not marry, she did not love Ban enough, or in that way, or simply any more.

It was a sorry excuse. Thomas had belonged to another part of her life, to another woman entirely. She saw him at times without recognising him, he wrote on occasion for The Economist which did not print the names of authors under the articles they penned. She had responded to a piece of his once in a letter to the editor. Years later, he reminded her on it, and told her it had made him happy to know that they still shared some of the same intellectual interests. He bought all of the albums, of course. He had seen her in West End productions as well, though seeing, he said, was wrong in this case as well. On stage she was someone else. It was the greatest compliment one could afford to an actress. On the occasions media forced him to remember her, he imagined she was happy. Sometimes, he imagined the afternoon they had met. He never imagined they two would reconnect.

Neither did she.

But then, Mary Robinson never imagined she would ever grow so sick, either. The cancer had been a constant of the past decade, as had the care. The solutions were always temporary, surgery, Chemotherapy, clinical stays sounding more of a chorus than a bridge. Though she was not conscious of it at the time, Mary had made up her mind to forgo further treatment the night she
logged onto a dating platform from her bed at the clinic, lonely, but not so much that she longed for the familiar.

She had an odd relationship with Banastre Tarleton with whom she had shared the better part of her adult life; odder still was her former lover’s relationship to death which Mary reasoned she had no place defining. It did not surprise her that he did not call upon her when he was in town, or that he only rang her room when he was well outside of any geographical possibility of paying her a visit. He was not avoiding her, he was avoiding the machines, monitors and the melodies the failed harmony in any sense of the abstract. She had left him when he had gone too far in mistaking her daughter for his own. Now, she was relying on him to raise Marie in her absence. Now, she wondered if the only option life left her had been an error. Marie never called at all, for what would life think to say to death?

Mary was resolved to leave. The evening in question left her with but one option. She logged in, saw she had a match and began to chat, conversing as the better version of herself one only had the option of presenting to an unknown audience behind a black screen, certain to be treated and charmed with the same.

It progressed as all such things did. Her match, who, like herself, had no profile picture and confessed to rarely using such services, said that he needed a dialogue that had nothing to do with where he was or what he was working on. He missed his mother language more than he missed the ways it could be used to convey the kinds of emotions that seemed impossible over an internet connection. She agreed. The two found there was quite a bit they could agree upon. In time, it came out that he was a freelance finance reporter, that he was British and about to return to the UK after a six-month stint in Beijing. Did she want to meet? She was currently residing in an in-patient clinic and undergoing Chemotherapy – did he?

They alternated between laughter and tears when they fist turned the cameras on. They spoke every day about everything and he visited whenever work and life allowed. He was the first person she told of her decision to combat death with life rather than drugs and to date was the only one who seemed to accept her choice in any measure. His brother’s cottage where they had first lived as newly weds had since passed to him. They could live there. They could live, he had said.

All three of them.

She gave him no answer. Mary Robinson had always struggled with the word ‘no’ and all that it implied. She tried it in other, indirect ways – ‘You have no idea how much Marie and Ban mean to one another.’ or ‘Marie has practically no free time between fencing and revising for her GCSEs, I’m so proud of her. Thank heavens her school and studio are so close to one another!’ or ‘I’m sorry, I just don’t … know.’

In truth, she did. She could not take her daughter out of London at this stage in her education and adolescence, nor could she bear to say goodbye to her little girl. In the end, she and Thomas agreed to the summer. They agreed to other things, too, things that could not be communicated over the phone or between parties who had never met face to face. When she found out that Ban planned to spend Easter in Liverpool, Mary had invited herself into the fray, not anticipating the steps he would take in the interim to hold the higher ground she had made the gesture of granting him. It filled her at once with hope and happiness, with anger and fear. They needed to sit down and have a conversation filled with words she had come to hate. They needed to get to a place where they could. She and Ban spoke weekly without saying much of anything. There were things, however, that might be better to clarify before meeting. Mary closed her music app entirely and pulled up her ex’s number in her back-call log. It rang five times. Mary waited for the voicemail to pick up but heard instead something between a breath and a sigh.
She closed her eyes without continuing to see the room she was readying to leave.

“Hey Love,” she began as she would have at any other point in their shared lifetime, trying to break ice in the middle of a hard winter. “I need you to back me up on something – I finally realize what I hate the most about the most about the new Katy Perry single – musically and lyrically, it sounds like Selena Gomez and if Katy could approach that range it might even be a decent track. But she can’t and it is painful to listen to her try. She sounds exhausted by the end and that is the studio version with all of the benefits of autotune.”

>>Mum?<<

“Marie? Hey, hey Kiddo,” she choked, her heart rising to her throat, “I wasn’t expecting -”

>>No. You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to act like everything is normal - like anything is – when you have made things impossible for me and Dad.<<

“Marie -”

>>No! Stop, okay, just stop. I may not get any real say in anything that is happening but I have something to say and you would do well to listen!<< her little girl asserted. Mary sat down slowly on the side of the bed. She lifted a finger to her lips, cautioning Thomas to silence, feeling as absent from her daughter’s life as her husband had always been.

>>Alright, so we booked the same hotel by accident which feels a blatant breech of contract all the same. He smiled at me on the lift, Effie, and it wasn’t even like a ‘hit the e-break and give security a show’ kind of cheek, it was, and I know this sounds completely paranoid, but it was a ‘hello, how are you?’ and then, then he had the never to ask! In words! How I am? Angry at this clear assault to my private sphere – which is exactly what I told him. Anyway, long story short, now he is in my bed, passed out because aren’t they always after the fact? I have a do with my mum and sister in a few minutes and I’m not sure if I ought just to leave him or wake him up and risk that he will take my touching him as an excuse to, I don’t know, suggest that we do something normal. Together. Like a real couple. God, choke me. Don’t know how you handle it, Love, but if you managed to get rid of John I am in desperate need of your tips.<< Mary Anne Burges relayed over a WhatsApp audio message.

“So, I take it nothing has changed?” John smiled darkly. Effie could not bring herself to share it. Two hours had gone by without word from her boyfriend. She was beginning to worry, but John still needed the full scope of her concerns. That meant feigning normalcy. It always had when she considered it. Still, part of her resented Mary Woodhull for giving this theatre a name.

“Not much,” she shrugged. “Mary Anne remains the reason British men fear female self-empowerment, Kate is still the reason we say ‘nice girls don’t get corner offices’, Emma might possibly be upstaging herself in her role as world’s worst sister,” her tone changed, “though Charlotte is still perfect, of course – dare I say annoyingly so? I have no idea how of all of us Ellie – really, Ellie fucking Hewlett wound up the most well-adjusted, but here we are.”

“I can’t believe you are still jealous of Charlotte Wessex,” he squinted, dropping his hand to his sides, miming the spinning of wheels.

“Dick,” Effie stuck out her tongue. “She has a loving husband, three beautiful children who
absolutely never misbehave -“

“In front of you.”

“And even though she is older than me her hair is still to grey. Whereas I am reminded on the daily how much I look like my aunt.”

“Your aunt is a fashion icon,” John said flatly.

“And I’m a twenty-nine-year-old with grey hair getting drunk with my ex in the early afternoon. In a side street pub, looking like a welfare recipient in sweatpants that make my ass look huge and the most impossibly uncomfortable bra I’ve ever been able to force myself into, laughing about other people’s less questionable decisions. Yes, my dear, I am still jealous of Charlotte.”

“When you put it like that, so am I,” John smarted. It gave Effie some measure of pause.

“But you have … a beautiful girlfriend, three adorable daughters, your step-son is crazy about you -” she listed.

“His dad isn’t.”

“And?”

“And?”

Effie braced herself as best she could after four pints. She looked John in the eye and kept her voice low and level, hoping that she could phrase this in a way he might understand. “You were not crazy about me and Percy either and now you say you are happy for me, for us and that is just from sitting at the same table. Sometimes, my dear, all you need to do is show up.”

Her phone beeped again.

“Mary Anne?” he asked.

It was not. It was the response she had been waiting for, but not the one she had hoped to receive in this moment.

“Mmm,” Effie gave.

“And here we thought we had problems,” he scoffed.

“You don’t have problems, John. You have me, and I have a solution. Should we get the cheque?”

John Graves Simcoe had allowed himself to be lead from the comfort of the charming corner tavern by a sparkle in Effie Gwillim’s eyes he had long since seen. Two blocks into ‘follow me’ he was beginning to have his doubts, four, and he was not entirely certain she knew where she was headed herself. She stopped abruptly and turned to meet him with a great grin. “Found it!” she declared with a measure of pride.

John looked around. They were not back at the ballet studio. Insofar as he could tell, they were no where in the vicinity.
“I texted Edmund earlier to see if he knew Mary’s ring size,” Effie began.

“Why would you do that?” John tried to ask. He could barely speak.

“He did not, which, in truth, I didn’t expect he would, but he asked Anna if she did, and she was not sure either, but a member of her bar staff overheard and told that them that Mary is a six – I guess they are friends as well?” she prattled excitedly. “Anyway, I thought we…”

She need not finish. He knew where this was headed. “Why?” John demanded. “Why would you do that???”

“I thought you … that you might just need a little push,” Effie said, taking a step back in confusion.

“A push? A PUSH?” he shouted. “Effie – you stabbed me in the back! You … you have no idea how life works in a small town, do you? You … you just have no idea how life works at all. However much happiness you may think you wish me, this was not you call to make.”

Effie spoke. John could not hear anything but the laughter he imagined his far away girlfriend sharing with those more deserving of her graces.

Chapter End Notes

… tja. I know what you are thinking … “Notes.” It is good, babe, I got you. ;)

Sport:

**Juventus Turin** are owned by the multi-industry **Agnelli family** business dynasty, a sort of modern day Medici when one considers their patronage to art and sport. As was loosely referenced in the text, FIAT motor group is among the family’s many holdings.

**Formula 1** is the highest class of single seater racing. But that is not what I want to talk about. Actually, that is *never* what I want to talk about … but drop a loose reference to the sport and any fan within a hundred metre radius will hunt you down and try to hold you into having such a conversation, for when else will they have the chance? I find it strange given the size of the competition that its fans are so seldom, or, at least, so scattered, but at least Ethan and Imogen found one another. Talk about overcoming the odds!

Celebrity:

If you only know me through my notes, you may well think that I keep up with the Kardashians. Sadly, this isn’t true, or hasn’t been since my friends and I all went to separate colleges and thus stopped attending fancy dress parties as media’s most [in]famous set of sisters. (I was always Kourtney, if you were wondering.) **Stromi Webster** came up when I was searching for something mindless to put on the cover of the Mail – but this is actually impressive: **Kylie Jenner** hid her pregnancy for its duration. More impressive? She is apparently the youngest person ever to be listed in Forbes 100. I should really watch her spin off …

The song Mary references in trying to break the ice with her ex is from **Katy Perry’s** 2017 album **Witness**. Sadly, three tracks into trying to figure out precisely which song
was meant writing that bit of dialogue I wish I had John’s psychosomatic hearing
problems because _holy ---- is the whole work distressing_. Don’t worry about it.
Whatever it was, it is not worth hearing.

History:

Remember however many chapters back when I told you about the Arthur Wellesley /
Kitty Pakenham angsty teen romance that I kind of need The CW to invest in? The
only detail that was invention on my part with regards to Arthur’s night before (Kitty’s
brother refusing to let him see her, smashing up his violin by way of reaction, his mother
being distressed over the whole matter) was his getting on a ferry afterwards.

Geography:

**Toxteth** is a primarily residential area of inner-city Liverpool, together with the
**Scotland Exchange** making up the **Liverpool Riverside** constituency as represented in
the UK Parliament. The drag races, Somali immigrant population and the café discussed
in this chapter are all realities of the area. Because I know far, far too much about
Liverpool’s politics and for some reason think you should as well (why?), Riverside has
the lowest voter turnout of any constituency in the UK’s House of Commons. It is
Labour’s thirteenth safest seat, though here, for the purposes of the H+S narrative, Ban
Tarleton (who was one of those populist, ‘business first’ types in his actual time in
government) serves as MP. If one were to take out the racist elements, his platform
might work today? Toxteth has a staggering rate of unemployment – I’ve seen figures at
40%, that is mad! Or rather, _it’s liverpool_ as the city council prints on their material for
some dumb reason. Does your local government ignore the rules of grammar for a
stylized, empty slogan? Let me know in the comments.

And that is it for me, for now. If you are into it, tell me what you thought. Thanks as
always for reading!
A Proposal

Chapter Summary

Edmund deals with the various misconceptions Effie’s concern for John has created. Marie’s risky plan to fix things between Arthur and Kitty for her own expressed benefit backfires spectacularly. Ellie gets a call from local police; Ban learns far too much about finances and fertilizer for his own liking. John addresses his inner demons without going so far as to confront them and Effie finds herself broke and broken (up with.)

Chapter Notes

Ah … the final World Cup. Let’s begin as we almost always do by demonstrating how sport and politic collide in a world slightly beyond the scope of our story. You know what bothers me most? When I was a teenager, I was Upset™ when Mesut Özil opted for the Germany shirt. Years later, it occurs to me that is still am … but for the exact opposite reason. Check it - I immigrated to this country as a kid yet somehow managed to fully integrate into the society and culture; in contrast, wasn’t this lil’ Erdoğan bitch born and brought up in Gelsenkirchen? Tisk! Tisk! Time to get onside, or?

Keeping with the standard tone and topic, my World Cup prediction is thus: Germany will finish third in their group, Löw will get the sack – and whomever we get to replace him won’t have a voice that lends itself nearly so well to parody. In four years, we as a Bundesrepublik will still be talking about the squad selection including the only footballer who ever retweeted me (Teşekkürler, M1Ö! I think I’m funny, too!) … though, probably not in those terms.

Beyond that, I am kind of mad that Die Mannschaft as a whole never afforded me the chance to scream “build a wall” at public viewing on Sunday night – what a disappointing start! What a pun to waste!

Which I suppose brings us to it - there are no puns in this chapter, but there are references to Trump and a number of other warnings of which you might be made aware: Freudian psychosexual development as discussed by mean girls, subtle allusions to how one can save time and money with stamps-dot-com, sport being discussed in the language of The Bard, basically just all of the yuck that colours our modern culture somehow seeped into this update. Tja. Suffice it to say, even though there is a World Cup happening, it has been a dull week of international football.

Anyway, here’s Wonderwall …

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The coffee at ‘the historic’ Strong Tavern ‘in the heart of Setauket, right off the Northern State Parkway’ was horrible, as was the fact that Edmund Hewlett spent so much of his free time mixing and editing a surprisingly popular podcast recorded onsite that he could not help but think of his
wife’s establishment without instinctively attaching the - somewhat inaccurate – description of its location and cultural importance. All the same, he took another sip of the store-brand breakfast beverage - sour despite his efforts to sweeten it - before sitting his mug down on a speaker he was increasingly certain would need to be replaced before the evening began. He was and would forever remain perplexed that people would part with their hard-earned money for the supposed pleasure of watching Peggy Shippen and Aberdeen Declesias engage in ‘live, lively discussion and debate across partisan lines’ for an hour, taking an occasional pause to tell those gathered of the convenience of printing one’s own postage, when these consumers could just as easily get the same content for free on iTunes and Acast. He removed the headphones that for the course of the morning had been sparing him from the incessant chatter others would apparently pay to hear.

“We have a problem,” he announced, clearing his throat when the three women to whom he was speaking continued to giggle behind the bar, deaf to his concerns. “Anna,” he tried again, “I fear it is beyond my skill to salvage the speaker form the effects of time and well … years of people tossing their drinks in its general direction.”

His beautiful wife looked up from the electronic tablet that he had noticed held her curiosity and that of two of her employees for the past half hour. She gave him a girlish grin that he supposed had nothing to do with his defeat. Again, he offered his diagnosis, this time with an apology and a slight stutter. Sometimes, her charms on their own were still enough to make him nervous though she had shared his surname for several years and was growing rounder by the day with their second child. Gorgeous, he thought, absent of any particular noun to which the adjective may apply, choking on his breath, feeling that should he release any air from his lungs his heart might fly away with it. Anna puckered her lips and released them with a little click before speaking. Edmund felt he might melt at the sound, a kiss meant for his mind as she had put it before.

“T’ll just call Caleb,” she dismissed, returning him to the parts of reality they shared with others. Edmund found himself smile all the same. “I was going to anyway. He probably has something suitable from back when Culper Ring were still together, either in storage or at Uncle Lewis’ place. Gimme a sec,” she winked as she spun around to the wall, to a corded phone from antiquity which he had not seen used since Uber replaced its single function of calling for cabs. Anna dialled the number from memory, smiling whatever secret she closely held. “Hey – I thought you were still in DC! It is Anna,” she said. “Is Caleb around? No wait – I want to tell you, too. Are you sitting down?” Edmund frowned, wondering what any of this commotion had to do with the broken speaker he could not best. “Okay – you ready? John Graves Simcoe is finally, finally shopping for an engagement ring! Right?! I know!” she chimed with laughter.

Edmund felt the full weight of his jaw as it fell. “What, pray tell, lead you to that conclusion?” he demanded when he was at last able to recover his decorum.

“Effie Gwillim sent you a text about an ‘our ago,” Aberdeen answered in place of her employer. “Ah-na read it, assuming Miss Daily Mail was looking for another quote on ze latest Tarleton scandal.”

“What Tarleton scandal?” Edmund squinted, momentarily distracted by a yet unnamed anxiety for his younger sister.

“Your brother-in-law, ee is a racist!” the girl declared with more excitement than what Edmund perceived to be actual offence. “Zehr is a video on ze Mail ’ompage where ee is screaming at a child of colour until ze boy, ee cries.”

“He is not a racist,” Peggy informed through a clenched tooth smile. “If you bothered watching the actual footage.”
“I don’t care one way or another,” Edmund interrupted, raising his hand to silence a debate he was certain to hear enough of in the evening and in the hours it took to edit the programme for its internet audience. “What has this to do with John?”

“Effie instead wanted to know Mary’s ring size,” Aberdeen said, returning to her other sort of whimsy.

“And from that all three of you have concluded that John plans to propose?” Edmund rubbed his temples. “He is in Leicester with his brother’s family. The brother is dating Effie and she was probably just poking around her jewellery box and considering pieces she is no longer in need of.”

“But why wouldn’t she ask for Anna’s size, too, then?” Peggy giggled teasingly as she had an obnoxious habit of doing.

“Anna is pregnant and her fingers are swelling,” Edmund replied flatly, staring at his own. “Honestly, you ladies need to have a thought about forcing the conclusions you jump to on impressionable ears. “Ben,” he spoke a bit louder, “please don’t relay any of this to your husband!”

Anna rolled her doe eyes at him, covering her mouth and turning as she relayed something into the receiver. Edmund took a seat on one of the barstools. The world seemed not to heed his warning. He asked for his phone and scrolled through a series of short texts as Aberdeen offered oral narration.

“Zee are in a café, together, just zee two, speaking of love old and new.”

“Is that a chanson?” Peggy asked.

“Non, but it should be, yes? Anyway, I zink strongly she ‘as talked ‘im into coming ‘ome with a ring.”

“It makes sense given the problems he has been giving her and her new boyfriend,” Anna re-joined the conversation momentarily. Edmund, who kept few secrets from his wife was seriously considering changing the password on his phone. “This is where we sent her,” Peggy informed, handing him the tablet he had drawn their attention from minutes before. “They have their entire inventory online, which one do you like best?” she asked of the diamond rings as though any opinion would be relevant.

“John isn’t about to propose,” he repeated, staring blankly at the screen before him.

“You think ee would tell you first if ee was?” Aberdeen inquired.

“I don’t think he would tell anyone. I don’t think he has half the foresight you credit him with and I think none of you have ever seen him in a truly foul mood if you think for a minute that coming home to widespread rumours of his future intentions -”

“Widespread,” Peggy snorted. “It is only the four of us who know!”

‘Six’ Anna mouthed and indicated with her fingers holding the phone to her ear with her right shoulder. Six. Edmund imagined Caleb on his mail route, sharing this gossip with whomever he crossed. Half the town opened their doors to him regardless of whether he carried a letter addressed to them or not, for it was common knowledge that Caleb Brewster grew marijuana in his uncle’s basement and used his position in the US Post as a means to protest Article 221 of the New York State Penal Law with a door-to-door delivery system. Having never had any particular interest himself in breaking laws dealing with public health and safety, Edmund Hewlett imagined his wife’s childhood friend appearing at the doors of his clients and greeting them with the kind of unwarranted optimism he ordinarily only assigned to the Mormon Elders on Mission whom Anna would
occasionally humour when Mitt Romney was in the news for whatever reason and she felt the need to discuss policy with ‘reasonable people with a different perspective.’ Though a Ziploc bag of cannabis continued to replace The Book of Mormon in his uninventive inner rendition of what went down in a small-scale suburban drug deal, the script stayed somewhat closer to what was usually exchanged when disconcerting cheerful men came to call. ‘Have you heard the Good News?’ he could all but hear Caleb asking, ‘About Mary Woodhull and John Graves Simcoe?’ No, Edmund adjusted. Caleb would only say ‘Simcoe’ when exchanging gossip around the man who was most certainly not readying himself to propose. The two were not yet on a first or even full name basis.

“Six,” he sighed, returning to the initial text. “It has only been an hour.”

“Okay,” his wife spoke over him. “Ben put fifty on John waiting until Mary’s birthday to pop the question, Caleb has twenty on him getting down on a knee as soon as he gets off the plane. Aberdeen get the chalkboard – write this down!”

The Hattian took a blackboard off the wall and erased the various predictions from last week’s top match. “What should I title it?”

“Chelsea – Tottenham,” Edmund insisted. “You are not doing this. You are not getting Mary’s hopes up over nothing. Any attempt to force your boredom-born fantasies into being is only going to further John’s resistance to fate. Stop this. Stop this at once if you have any care in your hearts for either party.”

The room went silent.

“Caleb says he will be here in twenty minutes with a backup speaker,” Anna said after a moment, excusing herself from the call.

Peggy closed the tab to the jewellery store’s homepage. The Daily Mail took its place. Edmund studied the picture for less than a second before continuing a chastisement, something he quite enjoyed. “The boy there, your hate crime victim?” he sneered. “That is Rhys Wessex. His father is one of the richest men in London. His mother is Ban’s sister. Don’t use your position perpetuate rumours based on single glance assumptions,” he paused. “If you want to make a story about this, talk about where or not there is inherent racial bias in media. And as to Simcoe – ah, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make a phone call.”

He would deal with Caleb when he arrived, warn him to keep this rumour hush. For once, the reality of having a long holiday weekend seemed a means of keeping the peace in his adopted hometown. The last thing Edmund wanted was for his sometimes-friend to return and wreak havoc with the local population.

She found him at a bus stop, hiding amongst assorted commuters under a clear plastic awning from the rain that threatened to fall. Elizabeth Gwillim, Effie to her friends, was red in the face - from anger, exhaustion or light inebriation he could not initially discern. Where ordinarily she would cross her arms against her chest and jut her little, pointed chin at him as a means of making herself seem larger, her hands now fell to her kneecaps, her head along with them. With Elizabeth bent over before him, John saw that several shorter stands of her hair had escaped a braid that he was impressed had so long contained them and was still, for the most part, intact. None of it suited her. He preferred the edgy undercut she had adapted sometime after their break-up or the short bob that
followed snide comments he was sure her aunt let slip while sipping tea. Like her new boyfriend, the coiffure she had recently adapted seemed a strive for the way things once were.

Elizabeth looked awful.

As with every fault he could find with the woman he once shared his life with, he was likely to blame.

Against his will, he pictured his beautiful Mary before him in the same defeated stance. Would this be what things were like when he flew home from the weekend that had already seemed too long? There was no way the rumours of his proposal had yet to make their way to his beloved’s ears. John thought of Anna whom Elizabeth had exchanged texts with and the expression she wore when she had a secret she had been sworn to keep, her jilted movements and wide-eyed stares, the way her deep, sultry voice dropped a full octane when she spoke around that which she was not meant to say. Mary, who had pointed all of this out about the woman, would surely find her out – that, or Anna would jovially relay the news to the ex they shared, thinking it ‘wonderful’ or ‘wicked’ as women tended towards extremes of emotion when heavy with child. There was not art or science to any prediction he might make towards tone, certain though he was the woman who may now never be his bride would discover his position by day’s end.

She would get the secret from Anna, or Abe would give it freely with words like ‘forbid’ and Mary would see the practical logic in this. Part of him wanted to text the little weasel to give him the heads up, that his beloved might never learn of that which governed his aversion to asking for her hand. She was the bravest woman he had ever known and he by contrast could not bring himself to so much take their daughter to her dance classes, scheduling his team’s soccer practice at the same time, afraid even to admit to the avoidance.

They never talked about his parents, partially, he assumed, because hers had never been present in her life and there was thus no logical point of reference from which to begin such a conversation. John wondered if this was the reason he only ever seemed to date orphans, if his scars made him attractive to something dark within their psyches that would otherwise remain repressed. He had come to England in hopes of finding a family to replace the one he had lost as a little boy, only to find himself more haunted by unknowns he knew too well.

Sometimes, John Graves Simcoe would imagine death. Sometimes, he would imagine merely abandoning the family he had never fully intended to build with a woman he did not feel entirely capable to pleasing, for what semblance of security, if any, could he offer children whose lives he could not force himself to share no matter how hard he fought? He saw Jeanne in a tutu and saw his mother dead beneath the dining room table, each time trying to remember if he had wept then and there or if he had merely gone back into the kitchen to wash out a tea mug he had left on the counter for a servant to later address. He wondered if he was too cold then to be capable now.

He could not talk about these matters. His last experience in consoling had resulted in a case being filed against the United States of America in its highest court. Too many of his closest friends had nearly died as the result of his sessions, he had come too close to sacrificing many more in an attempt to rid himself of consequence. There were days in which the news unknowingly examined the aftermath, the president seeming to spontaneously pull out of a trade deal with the European Union, causing pundits to question if the man had lost his wits. John, on the contrary, worried instead about plausible leaks from within the White House putting the sporadic seeming international policy changes into their larger context. He worried that one day Arnold or the elder Woodhull would lose Trump’s ear and the basis for the isolationist strategy the Americans were pursuing would become a matter of public outrage when opened to the press. How could he face Mary if she came to learn that he had had such a hand in creating the global economic conditions the present administration was
now fighting to undo? Alternately, how dare stare at his reflection in the bathroom mirror when he left the breakfast table to ready himself for work, shaving as he smirked over a story on Fox News he could hear from the living room, one of many that spoke of insults extended to foreign officials? How dare he have allowed such to become something of a daily routine when he knew that decent people had died pursuing that which the administration would see undone, that in a roundabout way, both sides of the conflict saw themselves as fighting on his behalf?

He was ungrateful, but then, he was undeserving.

John remembered a conversation from the night before, the condemnation he afforded Sir Banastre and the title he took, thinking the reply he received spoke more to the reason he hated the man than anything he himself had initially said. Tarleton had saved him form a life sentence after John had so easily gambled with the life and liberty of the then-colonel. He had never thanked him. He could not bring himself to. John woke up some nights to the sounds of his children crying, Mary kissing him on the cheek, saying she would attend to the screaming infant, that he should go back to sleep. He never could. Instead, he questioned if it would not have been in everyone’s better interest had he been locked in solitary confinement, in a silence which he would never be able to say for certain owed itself to isolation or to a nervous reaction that had found him without a clear stimulus.

Here on the outside, the reason for retreat was all too apparent to him.

He could not hear Elizabeth Gwillim. He could not hear anything. He wanted to say a thousand things which he knew were not meant to leave his lips.

“Effie, without intending offence, I cannot be around you right now,” he instead told her. It had been half an hour since he had left her outside of the small shop she had dragged him to, thinking it better to remove himself from all that he suddenly wished to say rather than to spend years regretting words that ought never to have been spoken, especially to a powerful member of the press. Personal and professional, there were enough of those words between them as it was, but then Effie Gwillim, perhaps owing to occupation, did not seem to comprehend any others. She could hear, yet she did not listen when he asked her to leave him. Perhaps he was being too polite.

Perhaps not.

As he had silently awaited since her appearance at the bus stop, Elizabeth Gwillim rose to the balls of her feet and pressed her pointed little chin towards his person. Instead of crossing her arms, however, she gestured vaguely in ways that held no shared meaning. Her once-pretty face was a canvas of blackened tear stains that faded as they fell, filling the fine lines around her eyes and the corners of her lips entirely, making her look ever more like the crone she described herself as having become. He reached into his inner breast pocket for a handkerchief, noting the initials Mary had embroidered on the corner as he handed it to the weeping woman he saw it was left to him to consol.

“Percy told me to spend the night with my aunt and uncle. Do you have any cash? Do you carry cash?” she rambled. “It is something I generally associate with bad business but apparently you need change to ride the bus. I’ll probably go home. With them. To London. I’ll probably never see Percy again. At all. I can’t – I can’t! My deputy editor put video of Ban yelling at one of his nephews on the website and Danny Wessex called my office thirty-six times demanding that the content be removed. I didn’t think to check … that voicemail … I didn’t think at all. Danny has already given The Observer and interview about the incident, making me seem – well, implying things about my paper that the accompanying article implied about Ban, whom I can’t reach at all. It doesn’t even go to voicemail and when I try to text him – oh, John, I think he blocked my number. Ellie simply isn’t answering any of hers. They will never invite me ‘round again. I’ll never be in the same room as Percy again. I have no friends. No boyfriend. And no change for the bus.”
He studied her carefully, unsure of exactly what to say, unsure that she was prepared to listen to reason. Effie could easily ring her deputy if she had not already done so asking that the article be taken down and that a public apology be issued before a weekend rival had the chance to print whatever they had been offered on some back page. Ban had lent Marie his phone and Ellie simply did not care about the sort of situations she had not taken part in orchestrating. Percy, he reasoned, was as much his problem as he was hers. He would see to his little brother as soon as he could get Elizabeth to calm herself.

“So, I’m not going to let you block me out John,” she continued. “Maybe I fucked up with you, too, this morning but -”

“Should I talk to him?” he offered what he already intended.

“Who – Danny? Ban? Because you are the last person Percy wants to hear from. Well, second to last. I’m sure I am still his number one in this single respect.”

Leaving her alone was clearly worse than anything he might have thought to say had he stayed at her side. She was drunk and disoriented. The hotel itself did not seem such a bad idea. Elizabeth could get herself cleaned up while he went out in search of greasy takeaway to help sober her. Then, he would hire a car to drive them both back to the Nantabas, hopefully having come upon an explanation for his conduct that did not necessarily involve showing his still-open wounds to a brother who he felt bound to protect from the horror and trauma of the wars being waged inside of him.

“I have change,” he told her flatly. “Come on, there is a hotel line that I am certain stops in the vicinity. It is about a block back that way. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She moved to follow his command.

Spring in Britain was erratic and unpredictable. She sat outside the corner café, legs that had browned slightly in the morning sun now shivering from a chilling wind that brought with it the suggestion of rain. Still, she did not want to go back inside. There were too many people would no doubt between them find a way of forcing words from her that she did not to speak. ‘How are you?’ she could deal with on an individual basis, here, noting the irony in that the asker of this question was likely the least interested of the lot. She had waited on a hint of such sentiment all afternoon. Now, she just wanted Arthur Wellesley to leave her in peace. “I can’t stay silent for fear of Rhys having to deal with cruel comments of the kind the press is so quick to ascribe to my dad and/or the sort of pseudo-liberal displays of affection that only serve to allow kids like … well like us to consider their privilege checked,” she substituted. He knotted his brow. “And it is so stupid I just – but at the same time if I do say anything to, you know, clarify what actually happened -”

“It wouldn’t do anything to help? Rhys will still have to step out in front of it.”

“He shouldn’t have to! Oh my God, I hate everyone we know. Everyone. Apropos, this involves you, kind of.”

“You hate me?”

It was another question Marie Robinson could not answer. “Kitty wrote in the group chat that she saw my dad in the news and to take heart and that family sucks or whatever,” she continued the same
narrative, “but I did not see it right away because I had my dad’s SIM card in - anyway, there were over fifty texts and I didn’t read them all before just typing in a reply, asking her if she was okay, and then she ‘at-ed’ Harriet and Olivia like ‘I would have never guessed, but wow.’ So, I scroll up, and these bitches were like ‘Ivanka is going to read that as criticism’ and ‘watch her try to change the subject straight off when she taps in’ and I fucking -”

“They call you ‘Ivanka’?” Arthur tried not to laugh. “I don’t know, I think I would own that.”

“It isn’t meant in a ‘I'm blonde, I'm skinny, I'm rich, And I'm a little bit of a bitch’ sort of connotation.”

“Still,” he smiled, playing at the ends of her hair. Marie scooted herself away.

“Do you think I have an Electra Complex?” she asked.

“I don’t … really know what that is,” he admitted.

“It is like – do you what an Oedipus Complex is?”

“Where a man is sexually fixated on his mum?”

“Yeah it is the female version of that, being stuck in the phallic stage of Freudian psychosexual development, though the term was actually coined by Carl Jung. Um, it is from mythology, like all that shit is. Electra was a daughter of Agamemnon, who commanded the Greek armies in the Trojan War. When he returned he was murdered by his wife and her lover, so Electra and her brother plotted to kill them both -”

“I take it your phone call with your mum didn’t go well then,” Arthur bit his lip. He did not look at her as he spoke, and Marie took some measure of comfort and confidence from this as she continued, finally addressing that which her friend had come to find out.

“How could it have?” she questioned herself. “All I wanted was for her to listen for just – for just a second but she is so bloody fixated on this plan she has. Like she thinks she is going to show up at Easter and try to make me feel like I would be better off with her and this bloke who may or may not be my actual father just because my dad’s family is obnoxious to begin with and, at the moment, kind of enveloped in this larger conflict with my Aunt Izzie and all.”

“That must really be hard,” he tried.

“It should be? Maybe? But I’m so awfully accustom to my parents having such tantrums that most of the time I am just numb to it, honestly. But I had this conversation this morning about allowing myself to be angry at them with Mr Simcoe – whose name I guess means nothing to you, but yeah,” she prattled, “I was sneaking into the backyard of my step-mum’s bodyguard’s parents – because that is where Mou and Pep were and they needed water - anyway, he held me at knife point and I finally got to see if that shit they make us girls learn in reproductive health works in the field – wonders, as it turns out! Had him on his back within the same second.”

“That is wicked! Really, John Graves Simcoe?” Arthur’s eyes lit up.

“You know each other?”

“I met him once in passing. That is … that is really impressive, giving his stature and that.”

“I don’t think so,” Marie blushed, wishing that she had not relayed the story as she had. On a piste she quite enjoyed being stronger than most girls, in her private life, however, such made her stand
out in ways she was not comfortable with. She was not pretty and dainty, nor was she quite
personable enough to make up for this deficit. She felt her neck fall a bit deeper into her shoulder
blades, slouching in a way that would give her step-mum a fit was she to witness such. She was tall,
too, she would say, without seeming to realise that at her age there were plenty of blokes who were
taller still, including the man she had married. Marie and Arthur were of the same height and though
she was slim and fit, she was convinced that she weighed more than him all the same, convinced that
he would know a number by looking at her - a number that she would have to consult a scale to be
entirely sure of herself - and that whatever comparisons he drew would find her wanting. Marie
Robinson felt this way about most people, absent of any evidence to the contrary. Arthur told her he
thought she was cool, all she heard was that she was nothing near to the inapproachable Kitty
Pakenham, who for all her goodly charms could not seem to spare her a kind word for her when the
other girls in the group chat were disposed to attack their own. Marie crossed her arms over the chest
she considered too small, frowning further that her father had not let Effie Gwillim buy her a padded
push-up when she had asked to go bra shopping for her last birthday and her upstairs-’aunt’ had
gladly taken her to Agent Provocateur. She would have plenty of time for that, he had said, when
she had reached the age of consent, implying that she was too young to have any sort of mind on
such matters. If Marie hadn’t a younger sister, she would have the mind to consider that her dad was
every bit the eternal virgin she was. It was altogether unfair. Kitty Pakenham had breasts and, as it
happened, she also had a boyfriend to appreciate her for them. Most of the time, anyway.

“I bet you gave him a bit of your mind after the fact as well,” Arthur, smiled, immune to her inner
doubts and unaware of the ways in which his mere presence fed into them. “It is what I love about
you – you let things get to a point where you need offer absolutely no excuse and then just devastate.
You are brilliant.”

“Sorry … you ‘love’ that about me?” Marie tried to clarify.

“Having never found myself on the receiving end of your attack -” he friend started.

“I wish you would not say things like that,” she blurted out. She had to let this end. She could not
have him keep playing with her as though it were a sport and she an easy away win from the bottom
of the league table. Even if she fully fancied him, she did not much like who she now felt she had to
be in his company. Marie straightened her shoulders. She was not pretty or dainty as girls were
meant to be and she felt she ought to remind him of that so they could return to being friends the way
they had been before they had both found themselves in the copy room with workbook pages they
were told to print and the misconceptions their individual teachers had that they were each
‘responsible.’ They had practiced a bit their French and then he had kissed her the way they did on
the continent. She knew he had a girlfriend yet she hoped for him to do it again and hated herself for
it. She was not as pretty as Kitty. He was never, ever going to end things with his childhood
sweetheart to begin anew with her. She knew as much. What hurt was that she could reasonably
assume he did as well.

Still, his hand was on her bare knee.

“What?”

“Like ‘love’” she choked. “Arthur, you have a fucking girlfriend and I, I have been thinking a lot
about it – about your whole situation, really our situation and I have something of a plan that can
play into both of our interests.” Marie bit her lower lip. “You have a driving licence, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, you know how Ethan wants to twerk with the engine on my dad’s Escort so badly that he
offered us use of his F12 for the weekend? Well, my dad can’t drive an LHD at all with his hand
being what it is or operate a stick for the same reason, which is why we even have the American automatic … but that – that isn’t the only reason I didn’t want him going near our car. Look, can you keep something secret and ask absolutely no questions about it – just accept what I am telling you and that I won’t tell you any more?” she asked, her voice hardened.

“Okay?”

“Well there are a lot of prescription and hard drugs in the boot at the moment and I didn’t want him to discover – but we could take some, if we agree to the trade,” she began to ramble, “no one whom this concerns will even notice, I swear, and anyway – it is Easter weekend. They are doing stop and search everywhere. What I propose is this -”

“You want us to sell drugs and have me drive the getaway car?” he interjected, his eyes betraying a shock his voice was low and level enough to conceal.

“No, of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” Marie smiled in spite of herself. “We get Mr Clark to bring us back to my aunts’ house with Billy and Rhys, pick up the Escort, taking out most of the … stuff that shouldn’t be in it and just like, hide it somewhere, but keep for our purposes whatever holds the harshest sentencing. Then, we bring the car to Ethan and Imogen at whatever shop they have arranged -probably a FIAT dealership - and take the Ferrari in exchange. We then take the next ferry back to Dublin. Like I was trying to say earlier, Kitty is furious at her brother for not letting you in to see her. So, you show up again on her street in an Italian sportscar with a ridiculous PS – and I mean, maybe you should ask to see her again first, and maybe,” she squinted, trying not to sound too critical, “… do something different with you hair, wear a different shirt, be that better version of yourself that exists when we have to wear dress uniform at school for whatever reason – try to show the Pakenhams that there is more to you than meets the eye or whatever bullshit idiom you might prefer.

“Be polite, apologise, make your intentions towards Kitty clear – and if that doesn’t work, well try to get Thomas in the mindset to have it out, explain that you don’t want to do this in front of the house, not again, not where the conflict could further serve to upset dear sweet Kitty,” Marie rolled her eyes, having considerably less sympathy for the long suffering Penelope to Arthur’s Odysseus than that which she held prior to having the empty headed hussy echoing the insults that were becoming increasingly common yet still managed to cut.

“Tell him you’ll text with a time and place and then drive off. Meanwhile, I will duct tape a felony’s worth of scag to the inner frame of his car – where it meets with the wheel. He won’t see it, but the cops will, so we will have to make sure there is a control search in the direction of wherever you agree to meet. We can do that online or it will be on the radio.”

Marie did not entirely expect Arthur to take her up on her plan, so she did not feel bad at the suggestion that Kitty’s brother might face arrest for a crime it would not have occurred to him to commit. She studied her friend, realising slowly that he had never looked at her quite so intently before. She could not have him call her bluff, even if it meant going through with it. If public school had taught her anything, she considered, it was that courts were not keen to press charges on children of privilege, so even if Thomas was made to spend a night in jail, his criminal record would likely stay clean. Otherwise, her pulse raced as guilt continued to assault her active mind, she would tell Ellie what she had done and her step-mum would surely know what to do to fix it. Then, Ellie, who Marie was not meant to know ran a cartel, would feel so badly over inadvertently exposing her to such concepts that she would go out finance an after-school programme in some impoverished quarter of the city in the way the ultra-rich always thought to make good with God for sins that were not their own. It was a win-win, Marie tried to tell herself. She was increasingly unsure.
She continued all the same. “Now that he will be out of the way for at least the stretch of the weekend, you can go back, say something like you don’t wish to accuse the man of cowardice but he never showed up and you mean to have this out because Kitty means so much to you – and she will either be really happy to see you or really sad about all of the awful things she said about her brother in anger, either way, you can just be like ‘babe, let’s get out of here’ and drive off to – wait how much did you win?” she stopped to calculate. “Three hundred pounds is … something like three hundred forty, fifty euros? So you either take her somewhere ultra-swank for one night or somewhere middle-class for two -”

“What will you do?” Arthur interrupted. Marie met him with a glare. Earlier, she wanted nothing more than for him to feign concern, but he would never be hers and if she had to come to accept as much, so too did he.

“Disappear, somewhere in-country and untraceable,” she answered of the part of her scheme she was more excited about. “Just until my mum feels like having an actual conversation about my living arrangement without feeling the need to inform me that I might like Thomas if only I would give him the chance that he literally never gave me,” she stressed. He reached for her shoulder and then seemed to reconsider what he was preparing to say. After an awkward moment had come and passed, he broke the silence her supressed anger had begun.

“There is defiantly more to you than meets the eye, Miss Robinson.”

“So, are you in?”

He took a moment to consider. “To hear you speak, I can think of half a hundred places to which I’d rather go given a fast car and a femme fatale.”

Part of her wanted to hear the things he said. He would never leave his girlfriend, but he had a driving licence and could get her away from her parents all the same. Marie wondered how much she would need to play along, and how far either of them was really willing to go.

Somehow, she feared, they would not get very far at all.

It was not entirely the idea of ring shopping that was off putting so much as it was that when (and if) he did decide to take that step, he did not wish to invite anyone else’s input into the process. John Graves Simcoe had made that mistake before and although the specifics of the situation had since altered and ended, the experience continued to afford him some measure of doubt.

He had been readying to move in together with his long-term girlfriend a decade prior when he came upon the idea of propriety. Effie Gwillim would be joining him in London upon graduating from Oxford, and the two had spent the past several weekends looking at properties, none of which met anywhere closer to her approval than the flat he currently occupied. Though John suspected that his real estate agent and the firm she worked for were partially at blame – never ceasing in their requests that he put the one he had inherited from his mother on the market (something he was still unwilling to do ten years hence) - he had asked that she join him at an address that did not belong to any of her company’s current listings all the same. She was Effie’s friend, after all.

“Tiffany’s?” Kate squealed upon putting the street into her navigator, repeating the name of the store multiple times, each with an excitement which John found rather encroaching.
Kate had been waiting for him outside the store front with fellow former schoolmate Charlotte, by whose husband she was employed, and Mary Anne and Ellie, both in the process of planning a move back to Edinburgh where, as the evening progressed, John would come to wish they would remain permanently. Kate and Charlotte were both enthusiastic in offering their assistance, the former filling his ears with descriptions of cut and caret faster than the staff could produce to diamonds on request, the latter offering him what she acknowledged was a long shot – her younger brother was still courting ‘the celebutante’ and currently lived with her when he was not on deployment at One Hyde Park. If nothing else, Mary Robinson had good standing as a resident and, if he was interested, she would ask Ban to ask this woman (whom she herself was not on speaking terms with) to write the young couple a recommendation for the posh residence. “It is how things get done in the City,” she told him with a wink as though he had not been a London resident for just as long.

“I think it is out of your price range,” Mary Anne interjected. “Or is the plan to buy Effie a big enough ring that she won’t consider how much such a cohabitation is going to cost her?”

John played with the idea of asking the two women actually involved in real estate how much he could get for his flat after commission and sales tax were subtracted but found that he could not bring himself to, even for the underrated pleasure of depriving Mary Anne Burges of her near constant critique, if only for a few seconds of silence. Sometimes, Effie referred to the blonde as being her best friend. Sometimes, he questioned if his girlfriend understood the concept of a superlative when she refenced Ellie in the same language. He had called the two for that reason and that reason alone. However much they annoyed him individually and together, he guessed that they knew Effie’s expectations of a proposal, that if she had any interest in becoming his bride, she would have brought it up some time before.

Mary Anne, he guessed, had grown jealous of him. Ellie did not afford the task he had given her much of a care, staring absently at the finery before them, unimpressed, unamused and altogether aristocratic. Unlike Mary Anne, had not said a word of what she thought about his idea of asking for Effie’s hand and adorning it with a ring. She had not said much of anything since greeting him hello.

He asked her what she thought of a ring Kate and Charlotte had decided upon with a commission-based sales representative. “I do not hold opinions on such things,” she told him. “I’m not entirely sure what it is you wish me to say. Women like me don’t get to marry for love, women like Mary Anne don’t need to marry at all, but Effie has always been keen on all such kitsch. Buy that ring, or any other – what does it matter? She will say yes. It is a fairy tale. ‘Brilliant’ is classic ‘Princess’ is modern, all Effie will see is whatever meaning you subscribe to the gift. A happy ending, I suppose.”

“But what do you like?” he pressed, guessing she was at least born into the best taste. “If it were you?”

“If it were me?” Ellie took a step back.

“Yes.”

“I like not being asked to entertain empty ideas. Whomever our Sovereign decides will have my hand will likely adorn it with something from antiquity, a loan from a previous century that I’ll wear for a few months at public events before retiring it back to the vaults for safekeeping. I’d rather something practical if not exactly plain for day to day. But white diamonds, I find, are a bit too pedestrian for my tastes.”

With that, he had selected a ring of rubies and emeralds, positioned to look like the red roses that found themselves in so many of the fantasises where princesses found happily ever after in the form of a man transformed as his Effie had done for him. As all had predicted, however begrudgingly, his love said yes.
Effie still lived in the flat connections of connections had bestowed, but John heard she had since either returned the ring or that it had been actioned for charity. Kate who believed in love was still single, Mary Anne who didn’t have an assortment of bedfellows who never seemed to meet her amusement. Charlotte was still satisfied with the small diamond her husband had bought for her back when they were revising for the A Levels, and Ellie’s ring was at once pretty, practical and a family heirloom as she had hoped and had predicted - a small, square cut sapphire her mother-in-law had pulled from her private collection after marriage vows had been exchanged with a man who would forever be below Ellie’s station, regardless of which of them now held a noble title.

He thought of Mary as he rode past the jewellery store on his way back into town, not having found anything but food cultural sensitives instructed him to avoid in the vicinity of the hotel where Margaret and Samuel had booked three rooms. Effie and Percy’s first date had been at a Chinese place, or so she had told him over drinks, and she likely was not interested in Pakistani food or returning to the more recent memories such may evoke. Closer to the city centre, John had seen a number of American chain restaurants – grounds, he reasoned, for Effie to again tease him that he was growing rather fat in his new home when she saw him come back with paper bags printed with flashy logos that had become familiar to him. He would be happy to see her smile, even if it was at his expense and he found the assessment quite unfair.

John got off at the stop which they had hopped on at an hour prior. Trying to remember where it was he had seen a McDonald’s, he found his feet bring him into the shop that had made them grow cold earlier in the afternoon. It did not hurt to look, he told himself, and his and Mary’s taste were similar enough that he needn’t ask a second, third, fourth or firth opinion to make sure he got that part of the proposal right.

It was rather everything else that caused him to question.

Sometimes words had a way of echoing for eons, and his proposal proved no exception to this particular anomaly of the human psyche. Ban Tarleton sat frowning on a stacked barrel of hay in his sister’s stables, listening to the advice he had asked him to inquire over with as much intent as he could muster, though it seemed to pain him in some fashion to hold the phone to his ear. She heard half of the conversation – if the horses were owned in Emma’s name and not in the name of her business which was registered as a non-profit, she could gift their facial matter to the public gardens as fertilizer, using the estimated value as a tax write off up to but not exceeding an amount to be determined by local government. Were she instead to sell it to her hyper-engaged sister-in-law, Emma would need to change her tax filings in the coming year and pay fifteen percent back to the state. Ellie’s preferred account seemed to be saying that regardless of how the transaction was conducted Emma would walk away with the same monetary benefit, it would be for her to decide which headache she would rather endure. A charitable deduction, Ferguson proposed, required two fewer signatures and he would be more than happy to prepare the documents come Monday at his standard rate.

“You’re working Monday?” Ban grimaced.

>>Aam workin’ noo, ye cunt.<< Ellie overheard. She snorted back a laugh.

As the men continued to bicker around topics as dry as above-board business - both, doubtlessly, privately thrilled at the excuse to ignore their larger family obligations for however long they could drag this out, Effie busied herself by shoving the (literal) shite she was either going to need to
produce a receipt of some form or another for. Part of her wanted for Izzie’s offered help, though she knew it served against her larger goals for the late afternoon. She looked again to her husband and gave him a smile, still hearing over his half-feigned annoyance the words he had spoken when he asked for her hand, now blistering against the wooden handle of an industrial rake. ‘We’ve seen the world together, at times as allies, more often as enemies. We have fought in wars that were not our own, committed every sin that might lead to moral salvation and upended centuries of structure. I told you once that I would find a way to change the world if I couldn’t change you mind, and, having done so, I stand before you now to ask – Ellie Hew, you want to do something that is really going to piss off your parents?’

The speech seemed a decent metaphor for the marriage that followed. Again, the pair was fighting a war that was not theirs, the fertilizer and the finances that surrounded it serving both as provocation and excuse. Emma Tarleton had no idea that the stable that had largely been left unkept since her abrupt firing of her hand would soon become a battlefield, nor did she know anything about urban agriculture or the tax break that in the best-case scenario would form the basis of a treaty. Ellie, however, had written her doctoral thesis on modern farming and had been working to make Riverside self-sustaining since her husband’s election to parliament had made the impoverished quarter her dominion. Having spent ten years in charity, it was her experience that grass-roots efforts that engaged the community had the most lasting effect and creating programs that forced her husband’s constituents to provide for themselves and each other had thus far statistically lowered crime rates, increased employment and improved nutrition within modest reason. The recent cold-front, however, had her concerned that the year would yield less of a crop than the two that had proceeded it, despite the expansions and improvements she had financed with a donation from local business. She had been speaking on these matters over breakfast with Percy’s father, who himself ran a green house and nursery and whose personal garden had not seemed to suffer the chill the way her farms in Liverpool were looking to. He had suggested using manure as an insulator and fertilizer, and, already having a source, Ellie’s mind went to work on the logistics of the venture.

She had been shovelling shit for around an hour when Izzie came by with her offer of help. Ban begged her to be seated, worrying that any physical labour would send her into early contractions. She was eight months pregnant and having read every baby-book in print upon knocking up a barely legal university student at a rave six years prior, he considered himself an expert on such matters. Maybe he was. Izzie gave as many tips as she could and had calmed Bucephalus when Ellie had needed to enter the stall of the aging stallion who had once born witness to the things she did in the dark and resented her as a result. According to Izzie, he was sweet to everyone else. She did not understand. Maybe Ellie could try giving him a sugar cube or two? She returned to the house to find a means of improving relations between Ellie and the dumb animal Edmund had been forced to sell to finance his wedding. Twenty minutes later, Ban suspected his little sister had either gotten caught up in the search or had to call such off, being asked to help out with the egg hunt. Emmie, he imagined, was likely angry whenever Izzie went into the barn she used to help maintain before her condition eliminated that possibility. It was sad, he said. The horses seemed to miss her.

But for now, it was better that she was gone.

Ellie wondered if she ought to tell her husband what she had begun to facilitate, why she needed to collect the sum of the donation today but thought better on it, instead responding to Ban’s pout that he could not be of more assistance by telling him that in fact he could. He could ring up her accountant and handle some measure of business on her behalf.

All the same, she hated not having a phone, not knowing the hour. At six in the evening, the nineteen-year-old who had impregnated her sister-in-law, eleven years his senior, was going to sneak in though the back gate and help transport the manure to Toxteth, giving Ellie ample time to interrogate him to be sure his intentions were good. Insofar as she could tell from their short
conversation, the lad saw the chance at paid work in the light she hoped he might, a chance, even a
slim one, of seeing his Izzie again. She thought it was better that the girl had busied herself with
something else, if the two not meet until she was sure of the outcome. She wondered if this was even
her choice to make.

Perhaps she related to strongly to Izzie’s struggle. She herself had been forbidden from seeking the
company of those beneath her station, had fallen in love with a man who could never meet the
expectations that came with title and inheritance that for her seemed synonymous with isolation. Why
should Izzie be made to suffer any measure of the same? Had anyone the right to decide if the
happiness she found was sufficient on the legal basis bound up with her disability? There were
measures that could be taken if money defined the problems that the Tarletons had with their sister’s
lover. Ellie was beginning to expect, however, that the objection came from a prejudice of which
they might all imagine themselves exempt. She resented her in-laws on the very idea that they
considered that their sister was somehow underserving of romantic love – had Izzie not a kind heart
and gentle humour? Was she not determined and hardworking? Funny and upbeat?

There seemed to be a partisan divide with each faction arguing the moral high ground, not for a
moment considering that anything about Izzie could be seen as attractive. It made Ellie ill to hear the
many siblings speak.

Ban, naturally, was one of the loudest voices in the debate. Unfortunately, he was neither good at
politics nor particularly personable when given any excuse not to be. “I swear Fergs is the most
passive aggressive pedant I’ve ever had the displeasure of engaging in a discussion with,” he seethed
when he at last ended the call.

“Aye,” Ellie agreed. “I’ve been saying as much for years, but to clarify, this is from his clarifying for
you the options you called to inquire into?”

“It is just so boring, I found myself fighting to stay awake, like I need something espresso-based to
offset the sound of his voice.”

“I think you spend too much time in coffee-Europe,” she teased.

“I do. For certain I do,” he agreed. “That reminds me, I’ll be back in Brussels again next week. You
know what I think I am going to read this time?” Ban had started making his way through the
classics years before when the government he had long-served in some facility or another had first
begun to show how little it cared. Buying an edition of Charlie Hebdo in a belated sign of solidarity
with the magazine when he came on the idea to blame Islamic Terrorism for the eighteen-hour flight
delays that were common to Brussels, he had found a caricature of himself and, further embittered,
had exchanged his purchase for James Joyce, whom he continued to maintain was as much of a
struggle to read as a satirical paper in a language he had not had any formal education in. Bored and
bothered, Ban began texting a former superior whom he was now at odds with (likely, Ellie
assumed, on these very grounds) with chapter summaries, ‘Ulysses’ in emoji form. For reasons she
did not pretend to comprehend, her husband was proud of this accomplishment and had continued to
text Cornwallis from Europe’s worst airports with inventive renditions of literary greats until the latter
eventually blocked his number. Now, Ban Tarleton, who had gotten though school on York Notes,
was forced to admit that reading on its own was a decent way to pass the time when time was all one
had. He smiled. She would go so far as to say he may even like it, even if he would never quite
admit as much.

“King John?” Ellie guessed.

“Nah, one of the works that actually gets quoted. One of the Henrys, maybe. Or all of them.”
“Macbeth,” she answered. “That is what gets referenced in relation to Hearts and Hibs. Fergs really got to you, hm?”

“What the fuck is wrong with Scotland?” he squinted.

“There is a whole play about it, or so I’m told.” She wiped her brow and walked over to him, putting her hands on his kneecaps and rising to her tip-toes to meet his lips. They exchanged sweet words and playful slights until she saw him squeezing at the air with his bandaged hand.

“Does it hurt terribly?”

“Just itches. I want to take the plaster off but at the same time I don’t want to look at it. There are times when I just can’t … after what happened this morning with Rhys -”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Ellie dismissed. “Charlotte is angry that you didn’t go as far as to ground him and Danny is having a grand old time of stepping in front of the discussion. It has been hours since anyone has cared about your initial role in the whole debate.”

“I care.”

“Then do something beyond alternating between regret and self-pity,” she said. It was the solution she offered to most problems. Ban did not seem to think it applicable to the one he faced.

“Mary will care. She will see this in the news and be reminded of all of the faults she ascribes to me as a parent and -”

“Or, she will see it and be reminded of what a little cunt Effie Gwillim can be. You know Mary routinely sold her stories of the affair the two wanted the markets to believe we were having every time the whispers that my family was planning to move business out of Liverpool became widespread enough that it threatened their individual stock portfolios, right? Mary knows how that world works, don’t.”

“Did she really?” Ban blinked. “I had no idea. Well, now I have something to bring up if she starts with -”

“The only thing you need to worry about is keeping calm,” Ellie cautioned, her dark eyes locking with his until a buzz caused her to forfeit the battle being waged without words.

‘Calm’ would be hard given the conversation to follow.

“What number is that?” Ban asked. Ellie had a mobile phone that nineteen numbers directed to, each with an individual ringtone in accordance to which of these had been dialled. This, however, was something else entirely.

“Any,” she said. “The call is coming from a registered police line. Let me have it.”

She knew the detective but the words confused her: Accident in a stolen vehicle. Liverpool, Toxteth. Jaws of life. Underaged. Shocked but keeping her voice steady, Ellie asked that this all be repeated again slowly as Ban began to demand the phone, having overheard at least enough of the conversation to draw the same conclusions Ellie was trying desperately not to.

She listened. In spite of her better manners, she broke into a laughter she could not control.

“Understood, we will be there within the hour, Commissioner. Yes. Thank you. I’ll make sure the other parents are informed. Yes, alright. Thank you,” she told the woman on the line. Ban Tarleton
looked at her with a horror she had never before seen take his face and twist it so.

“Marie -” he began.

“It is not nearly as bad as it may initially sound, but you need to get out her insurance card and when Jason - Izzie’s Jason - gets here we need to first drive to a cash machine,” Ellie fought the urge to smile. “Remember how much you hated that Wellesley kid last night? You are going to love this.”

“Somehow I doubt it.”

Chapter End Notes

Lest anyone think that I have nothing positive to remark on with reference to the world’s biggest sporting event, there is this: when I was at a public viewing on Sunday, I saw a man with a mullet who managed to expand my vocabulary. Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever heard the term “cooks skin cap”? If not, throw a google on it – it is amazing! – and this man in his mid-fifties was rocking the look with his natural hair. That seems like I mean to mock him but I assure you that is not the case. Bloke made a lifestyle choice and went all for it and therefore deserves the highest respect and admiration.

Okay, but there are actual notes for this chapter so let’s not waste any more time.

Legal:

Article 221 of the New York State Penal Law defines unlawful possession of marijuana and what constitutes criminal possession and sale of the substance.

Persons:

Mitt Romney is an American businessman and politician who served as the Governor of Massachusetts from 2003 – 2007 and in this role pursued health care reform mandating that every resident have a minimum level of health insurance, predating the Affordable Care Act which his party has made its mission to undo. He is a Mormon as referenced in the text and is currently running for a spot in the US Senate, hoping to “bring Utah’s values to Washington” according to his campaign website. Insofar as one can tell from that page, Utah’s values are volunteering and asking for donations. They really seem to want people to put signs up in their yards.

I am both so proud and so bothered at the ease in which I was able to take policies of the Trump Administration and weave them into the bullshit political landscape of Hide and Seek. I think this is how fake news gets made, I really hope more forethought went into pulling out of the Paris Accord, Iran Deal, etc. Can I be one of those White House staffers who supposedly gets the President’s ear right before he has to make an important decision? Hahahaha wait never mind – I imagine the man really is as bad as he seems on immigration and minorities. Too bad.

Ivanka Marie Trump serves as one of her father’s senior advisors. Her actual name
after converting to Judaism is Yael Kushner, but I am laughing right now about the middle name I never knew before writing these notes. During his election campaign, Donald Trump asked a member of the press “Is it wrong to be more sexually attracted to your own daughter than to your wife?” … something that (just to bring this back to history) may have been true of the Tarleton / Robinson dynamic, at least in the eyes of Ban’s opposition. 200 years hence it is hard to tell, but just to remind everyone of my favourite detail of the absolutely bizarre little family constellation that developed in the era after Mary’s death, Ban’s sort-of-former-step-daughter and actual wife wrote each other poems and love letters until the death of the former, and honestly, I am such a fan. I hope Marie gets over her Electra Complex / kind-of-crush and just hooks up with her in-universe BFF, because that would be beautiful.

Psychology:

**Elektra Complex** is the description of the female **phallic stage of Freudian psychosexual development**, usually occurring between the ages of 3-6, though girls and women can become fixed in this stage, later selecting a sexual partner who resembles their father (here, we can talk about all of the base ways in which Arthur’s early biographical information lines up with Ban’s … ew.) Freud, by the way, called this “penis envy.”

**Quotes:**

’I’m blonde, I’m skinny, I’m rich and I am a little bit of a bitch’ is the part of intro to the song **Donatella** from Lady Gaga’s 2013 album **Art Pop** that can and should be quoted in any situation. Try it! I said this yesterday to someone in line at a bakery and my hair is as black as the day I was born. Still fab ;)

**Growing rather fat** is a phrase the historical Elizabeth Simcoe used in describing John in correspondence.

**Miscellanea:**

**York Notes** are English literature GCSE and A-level study guides that have nothing at all to do with a military academy that has been referenced in this universe many times.

On **Hearts and Hibs**, after the Edinburgh derby in January, Hearts boss **Craig Levein** refused to apologise for his “natural order” comments – saying that it was funny. I tend to agree.

As always, thank you so much for reading, and if you are up for it, let me know what you thought! A belated Eid Mubarak to any fellow Muslims out there reading … and, because this is an Easter fic that I could not anticipate would span to 20 chapters or so, it may well be that I’d forgotten to wish you guys a Happy Easter in the notes, if so, please accept that and an apology for my cultural insensitivities some several months after the fact. Cheers! – Tav
Chapter Summary

Mary and Abe have a frank discussion about her relationship with John. Later, Mary misinterprets a conversation itself laden with misunderstanding, coming to a disastrous conclusion. Up north, Anna has come into her own and is unknowingly making everyone around her suffer the psychological consequences of her newly discovered self-confidence.

Chapter Notes

Hey lovely faces, it has been a few days since I have looked at AO3 and I know that a number of you have published updates that are awaiting my comments and that there are items in my inbox I have yet to respond to. I want to offer my sincere apologies that I have not had time nor been in a proper headspace these past few days. There has been an accident resulting in serious injury in my immediate family and I am trying to sort a number of unexpected things hospital stays tend to breed and generally just recover from the shock. If you pray, please keep us in your prayers; if I owe you a few pages of appreciation and praise, I promise I haven’t forgotten you. Give me a few more days.

I had this update nearly finished when I got the news, which is why I am able to offer it now. However, it is not what you were expecting to read, nor entirely what I expected to write, but I am sure you all know how it is when a few scenes just get way too long … and in my experience, writing in new characters forces some amount of periphrasis on the narrative.

Wait, new characters? Not exactly. This time we are checking in with Anna, Abe, Mary and Peggy with a few others showing up in the periphery. It is a little spoiler-y, but not in such a way that I believe is going to upset the main plot of the work off which this is based. Possible warnings include: weight gain, body image, sex and sexuality, parasitic attachment between parents and children, masturbation, menstruation, abortion, gossip, policy discussion, gross acts of tax misappropriation, second amendment rights, school shootings, neglect, gay rights, sport injury, length and absolutely no chill. …I think I might miss H+S.

As always, I hope you enjoy.

Btw who is out there power reading this fic, and for the love of God -why? I have not updated this mess in going on two months and it has gotten some 50 hits in the past few days. I am so confused. - Tav, 12.08.18

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Traffic into the city on a Friday night was considerable, though not so much as to distract from her more pressing concerns. Anna Hewlett had never spent a night away from her son since first taking
him home from hospital and her resolve to relax whilst his grandmother cooed, cuddled and cared for her little boy in her place had been broken at the bar by unwelcome hands feeling at her stomach – still rather fat from her firstborn – for a baby the size of a bean.

“The thing is, most of the people who drive in from New York, or Hartford, or Preston of wherever for the live shows come to every fucking taping. They saw me two weeks ago, and a month before that, and, and, and - for them to now touch my my belly because they read on Twitter that there is a baby inside and come out with bullshit like, ‘Oh Anna! You look radiant, you are glowing!’ and ‘I think I felt it kick!’ I just … is it weird that I almost rather when people I have not seen since high school come back to visit and I hear them whisper amongst themselves when I am standing on line for groceries like ‘Ooooh, Anna Smith, are you serious? Wow she really let herself go.’ At least it is true, to some extent, and it makes me feel like I was super skinny as a teenager, which I wasn’t, but hey,” she snorted.

“Well for the record Anna, I do think you let yourself go,” the voice of her friend Mary came dryly though her speakers.

“Thanks bitch,” Anna smiled. She inhaled deeply for the simple sensation of feeling herself expand. For most of her life, for the exact yet opposite reason, she had been holding her breath as tightly as she possibly could. Anna had spent the entirety of her adolescence and most of her adult life thinking of her figure as something to be feared, so convinced was she that one day she would come to share in the excess weight that had long served the construct of how she viewed her mother that in a sense she had created her own self-fulfilling prophesy, and fill it, she did.

In the two years since she had begun seeing Edmund Hewlett, she had put on fifty pounds, at least, that had been the figure the last time she had consulted a scale. Surely, she weighed more now, though she had long since lost interest in calculations and the numbers they required.

On 1. January, 2016, Anna had resolved to quit smoking. Not long thereafter, she had agreed to marry a foreign student with a soon-to-expire visa, who, in an effort to convince sceptics of the validity of their then-fake relationship, had started bringing her boxed chocolates among other small, kitsch displays of affection he found on offer at the local petrol station. Desperate for a rush of any kind to substitute the nicotine she craved, Anna had taken to eating entire heart-shaped boxes in single sittings as soon as her husband-to-be left; this after he had already satisfied her appetite, which had always been susceptible to stress and secret-keeping, by cooking for her whenever he had time and bringing her takeaway when he did not. Every time Anna finished twenty pralines in a single sitting, she cried herself to sleep, vowing never again, only to fall into the same habit the next time she found herself alone with temptation. Eventually, she asked Edmund to stop bringing her things she struggled to resist. He apologised awkwardly. He did not realise she was on a diet. Two days of abstinence broke her and she began buying sweets for herself, filling her purse, her sport bag and whenever she found herself alone, her mouth.

When they moved in together in March, Anna had gone from a size four to a size six. She stared at herself in Edmund’s full-length mirror, at the swell of her midsection, her widening hips, wondering if her body’s desire for its old curves made her unattractive to the man she was falling in love with. Anna had been overweight as a child and when she was eight her mother had signed her up for soccer at a local recreation centre when such had been recommended by a school guidance counsellor to whom she had complained that she was being picked on by girls - not yet aware of their own bodies, but certainly conscious of the ways in which hers was different, of the hated word the could use to describe her and of the power it gave them. By middle school, she had quite nearly convinced herself that she enjoyed the team sport she made her parents sign her up for and by her freshmen year of high school Anna Smith was on practically ever varsity squad. Slightly bigger than her teammates, she changed in bathroom stalls and always found reason to avoid showering with the
It was not just girls she could not bear being naked around. Anna had been in her mid-twenties before trusting herself to take her top off during sex, and on this isolated occasion, alcohol had played a part. He did not call the next day or on the one that followed. She had not been surprised.

As a sophomore, she began dating the boy she would be with until a few weeks before prom. In a fit of embarrassment and shame prior to his first visit to her house, Anna had gone through every frame and photo album, taking out every picture of her that existed from when she was ‘fat’ lest he see them, barely able to say the word to her parents when they later inquired as to why the living room stank and why their foyer and mantel were in such a state.

Anna had left school before her last block, purchased a fire log at Walmart and used it to set all of these pictures ablaze, afraid that her boyfriend would see them and use the same word that continued to hold her under its control in any description he might give of her. She had not realised in burning the calories she had long since shed that the chimney in the colonial-style home in which she had grown up in had been latched shut for summer. As such, the room quickly filled with smoke that had nowhere to escape. Anna opened every window in the house, closing them to the early fall chill only shortly before her parents and younger brother arrived. Needless to say, she had been grounded for two weeks. Her boyfriend had not been allowed to come to dinner on Friday as had been planned, but Anna had not been disappointed. Abe Woodhull first learned what she had looked like as a little girl when half a lifetime later he was attending her wedding to another man. Aside from the few photographs that her mother kept in her office and her father had in his wallet, nothing of her childhood existed to haunt her and she had long since forgotten about these. Seeing her once-chubby, smiling cheeks in a hastily put together slide-show at her wedding behind members of the bridal party engaged in giving drunken toasts, however, Anna felt a fully different sort of shame than she had when she had used an afternoon to destroy all of the other available evidence at fifteen. Still, she stuck her chin out a bit further, fearful that her new husband would know it to double unless she did.

When Anna had gone to university, she had played soccer for country and collage until a mid-air contention with the attacker she had been assigned to mark in an international friendly ended in disaster for the latter. The then-captain of England’s under-twenty-ones lost her equilibrium as Anna’s cleats kicked against her inner soles, causing her to fall in such a way that lead to spinal injury, and, years later, when a mundane auto accident aggravated old wounds, partial paralysis. Charlotte Tarleton’s career in sport had ended, however, the instant she met Anna Smith in the air. Both of theirs had.

Anna had been devastated at what she had done. In the months that followed, she became depressed. She was not carded after the collision, but she was never picked for the national team again. At the end of the year, she quit the sport altogether, losing her scholarship and the requirement to run ten miles every morning at six AM. The pounds that followed felt like something of a penance, one that, giving circumstance, she was only too glad to pay.

For the rest of collage and all of law school, Anna tended towards pudginess at the hint of stress, that was until she met her first husband and took up smoking as a sort of pastime, something to distract her from the satisfactions that failed. When her divorce was finalized, she decided to quit, timing her last cigarette to minutes before a particular midnight when all such promises were made.

She knew she could expect to gain weight afterwards. The reality she found herself faced with matched the fears that had long kept her up at night and met news ones she never could have dreamed. The first time she and Edmund slept together, Anna was horrified at his seeing her in the undergarments that sucked in her waist enough to let her zip a dress which had grown too tight. It did
not bother him. Anna did her best to hold her small stomach in all the while, afraid to breathe when he had her gasping for air.

The two had begun dating at the end of January. By their April wedding, she had put on ten pounds. Luckily, she told herself, she was tall. No one would notice if she never let herself breathe.

They had never gotten a honeymoon. Shortly after their wedding, Edmund had needed to return to Scotland for a state funeral. Anna could not join him. She did not have a passport. Eight weeks would pass without word before one could be issued, and in this time, somewhere on the other side of the Atlantic, her husband had been imprisoned.

Anna had taken a job in Albany and continued to work it as she waited for news that might never come. She ate constantly, unconsciously, filling her mouth to suppress her screams until Edmund’s shirts which she had taken to sleeping in grew rather sung, until she started relying on her mother’s wardrobe to provide her clothing for closing arguments, having nothing of her own that fit.

She began to like her body for the first time in her life when she took a final look at herself in the mirror of her hotel room, remembering the hesitations she had doing so when she had been a size six, fretting then over the idea that her new boyfriend would discover that she was gaining weight.

It was not a secret anymore.

Anna had been keeping so many at that point in her life, to be free of this single one felt like a greater victory than the one she had just been a part of against the City of New York. As the mirror told, she was bigger than she had at that point ever been.

She was fat.

It was obvious, inarguable and in such she had never felt more beautiful. She began to weep from joy. ‘Fat’, the word she had long let control her now seemed a synonym for ‘free’. Anna discovered she was pregnant only after she had stopped needing an excuse for her own lack of guilt. But she had had one for society. And she had had one for Edmund should he return.

That was what ought to have been different about this pregnancy.

Anna Hewlett and Mary Woodhull had given birth on the same Tuesday night two Decembers past. Eight weeks later, Mary was back to her pre-pregnancy size. Nine and her weight had dropped as well to its normal negligibility. Try as she might, Anna, in stark contrast, could not seem to lose a single pound. More often than not, she seemed to be gaining with each attempt at diet. She had so long feared that, like her mother, she would get married, have children, and in these things grow into her present shape that it was suggested to her that the struggles she found herself having with weight loss were purely psychological. Like they had in elementary school, everyone had something to say about her body and for a time Anna lost her voice.

Finally, her husband told her he was having a hard time coping with the fad diets and erratic work outs. She asked him if he preferred her like this, accusing, finding fault, hoping for an answer she was afraid to name. Since retuning from Britain to find a proper woman of the girl he had left behind, Edmund Hewlett had yet to make a single comment in regards to the changes in her physique, which for Anna was stranger and somewhat more hurtful than the negativity she had initially anticipated. He continued to kiss her, to compliment her within a construct of comparing her to goddesses and nymphs with Greek names as he had when she had kept her gorgeous curves a secret, a tightly held breath. She felt worse than she had when other children had called her ‘fat’ - she felt invisible when Edmund looked at her and spoke as he had when she had been considerably lighter and less self-secure in her looks.
Edmund said in response with a small shrug that he preferred who she was when she didn’t force him into eating raw kale with her for each and every meal. ‘Get dressed,’ he said, ‘put Jordan into his carriage, we are going out tonight, on a date.’ Their son was ten weeks old and given to tears and tantrums. Anna had been hesitant to bring him into the gallery, but her husband insisted. Inside, she saw the works of the Renaissance and Baroque masters who informed what she took to be Edmund’s concept of beauty - these women who shared her dimensions presented as objects of desire and ideals of feminine allure. He loosened her long hair from its messy bun and whispered words of love in Latin into her ears as she began to silently weep, wondering how she had managed to hate herself so much for so long that she let the curves she had always believed she would inherit contort within her psyche in such a way that they long seemed a curse. Wondering why she had long assumed her husband could not possibly find her as attractive as he once had though she had since come to love the shape that came to her naturally. Edmund slipped his hand under the elastic band waist of her skirt and slid down into her knickers, discreetly feeling for her pleasure points while Anna watched a hunter becoming ensnared by a dark-haired water sprite, feeling herself grow wet. ‘No,’ she told him. ‘Not here.’ ‘If you cry out,’ he whispered, ‘we will simply blame the boy.’ He took her into a corner and made lover to her then and there, something they had not done since she had given birth. At home she made a toga for herself from their sheets and dared him to fight it from her body, to put it back on the bed from which it was taken. When they had first met, he had been a virgin. It occurred to her now she in turn had never been truly naked with anyone but him.

After they again made love, she shared all of her doubts and desires in words he confessed to not fully understanding. He told her he could not comprehend why she thought a clothing size was indicative of anything, joking that had he known she had developed such a perversion around numbers he would have brought her to the mathematics exhibit at Hayden instead. He admitted that he found her body more attractive now than he did when they had begun dating, but that owed itself to the reality that she had given him a child. Her waistline, he said, was not the only part of her that had grown. When he had met her, she was working behind a bar, pretending to be revising for a homonymic exam, afraid to admit that she had lost interest in practicing law or that she had been licenced to do so in New York and Connecticut for years and simply chose not to. Anna now owned the tavern she had been working in. She was expanding her business while at the same time running a mayoral campaign, interested in politics and willing to serve a seat as many liberally-minded Americans suddenly were upon Trump’s inauguration. ‘You were, are and will always be the most beautiful women in the world’, he told her in his charming accent, ‘but back then you were afraid of everything about yourself, everything I fell in love with and, try as I may, I’m sure I’ll never understand why.’

Anna had weighed herself for the last time that morning, checking how much ‘good’ another day of raw kale and ice cubes had done her body. She was certain she had grown fatter since - that, or she had simply begun to dress in a way that accentuated and dramatized her curves rather than attempting to conceal them. As Anna Smith and later as Anna Strong, she hid and hid from her body, afraid of mirrors and looking into them. Anna Hewlett, however, always stopped to stare and often would for hours on end to make up for lost time. She had large breasts with nipples red and swollen from feeding her son long after he had begun to tooth, her thighs touched and her arms and shoulders had grown thick as well with the muscle needed to carry the boy and all that it took to care for him throughout the day. Her butt was now big in ways that inspired modern poetry and her hips were wide and stable enough to constantly support the weight of a cubby toddler who shared her full cheeks and dark curls - curls which she now wore long, loose and layered, with added extensions that made the mass reach her lower back. Edmund would run his fingers through her hair and she would anticipate the fantasies that her looks lent to his mind, feeling as powerful as any of the forgotten goddesses he named her, finding herself sexy to the point of vanity for she had forgotten shame. What Anna liked best about her body, however, was the belly that she had watched grow round before knowing that she was pregnant, that had thankfully remained nicely plump despite her
silly efforts to shrink it after its considerable size stopped being indicative of a temporary medical condition. She felt offended by the hands the reached for it now, calling it beautiful based on a construct she felt irrelevant.

Anna Hewlett served as Setauket’s mayor. Her approval ratings were higher than any of her predecessors had been. She ran an extremely successful business, was raising a wonderful little boy and kept her husband happy in every way a wife could. She had tutored Mary and Peggy for law school, and, in the case of the former who had since graduated, the bar examination. She volunteered at church and babysat for her friends whenever they should need it. She trusted in her own power. In ‘letting herself go’ as strangers said amongst themselves and Mary chided playfully in her ear, she had let go of the doubts that had so long governed and demoralised her. Before, she had never allowed herself to wear shorts, even in the heat of summer. Now, Anna sat in traffic in her suburban SUV, her thick thighs already tanned in early spring sticking to the leather seats. The thin, sparkling sweater she wore clung lightly to her rounded stomach, to the muscles in her arms that became more defined by the day, to her breasts which ached for her son and began to leak for want of his small lips. She was a mess at the moment and even still, Anna looked like an artistic masterpiece or the muse that inspired every such work. She was fat by modern standards and she had come to take considerable pride in the description. She was free. Her body fit every role she had found for herself. She was beautiful and she finally saw herself as she wished to be seen by all.

“Anytime,” Mary laughed, adding, “You could still be glowing though, pregnancy being what it is, regardless if you are otherwise showing.”

“I guarantee you that isn’t the case,” Anna replied with a modesty she found she almost had to force. “I’d thrown up about half an hour before opening, realised that the flusher on the ladies’ toilet was broken again and spent about ten minutes trying to fix it on my own before calling for Caleb’s help.”

“Where was Edmund?” her friend inquired.

“Upstairs seething, I imagine,” Anna rolled her eyes. “He was setting up the sound system this morning, couldn’t repair one of the speakers, so I called Caleb to see if he had a spare – he did, but he stopped by the pub on a hunch to his uncle’s house to pick it up, saw the damage was minuscule and had the whole system up and running within a matter of minutes. Then he and my husband had quote-unquote ‘words’ outside and Eddie’s been in a bad place since. I think we are in a fight now that I asked for Caleb’s help instead of his -”

“So why are you driving out to Brooklyn?” Mary broke in. “Just go home like you said you were going to, wait for him to come home and have some hot hate-sex followed by make-up cuddling.”

Anna bit her lower lip. She knew Mary meant well but struggled to talk about sex even as an abstract with the woman who in the past two years had become her closest friend. She and Edmund had gotten up early that morning, had each other in the shower and again atop the long chest of drawers that he bent her over when he found her standing nude before them, consulting her weather app and several high-fashion blogs she followed in determining what to wear. For the Hewletts this was not an uncommon occurrence, but it was a pleasure Mary had long since known. She had mentioned recently that she and John had only once had sex since the twins had been born and that all the while he had said things like ‘is it okay?’ and ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’ - things that left even the most lustful of women dry and led only to disappointment for both parties. Mary had not since asked and her partner had not offered. That incident, Mary said, happened a full three months ago. No, she had said of Easter. She didn’t miss John’s physical presence. Not anymore.

“I can’t,” Anna said, hoping for the conversation to end before she would be forced to admit she was already more than satisfied. She and her husband likely would have ‘hot hate-sex’ upon her return.
She knew that what she was about to do would make him angry enough that the speakers and the smaller arguments that had preceded that problem would be all but forgotten.

“You are four months, nothing you are going to do is going to hurt the baby at this stage.”

“No, I am on the Interstate, traffic is backed up -”

“But you’ll turn around at the next exit?” Mary tried.

“I’m three from the one I need to take to get to my mom’s,” Anna sighed, reaching into her purse for a chocolate bar that continued to replace cigarettes in situations of stress long after the desire for nicotine had ceased. She opened the wrapper and began to eat it slowly, savouring each sugary bite the kept her from open confrontation. She had this argument in some incarnation or another every day and with everyone she knew.

“Anna … please, don’t do this. I know what it is like, believe me I do. The first time Thomas went to his dad’s house for the weekend, I must have spent the whole time crying but -”

The difference, Anna thought, was that Thomas had been seven on their first night apart. Jordan was a toddler. He was still so small. He needed her and she needed to see him sleeping peacefully before she shut her own eyes. Anna had dropped her boy off at his grandmother’s house in the morning, her mother wanting to take him to meet the Easter Bunny and hunt around for chocolate eggs in New Hyde Park with other children. He had made two new friends, he had told her over the phone, and Grandma was taking him to Chuck E Cheese’s where their parents were bringing them. Anna smiled but worried about the ball pit her boy was so excited about, returning to every story she had ever read concerning contracting exotic illnesses or becoming addicted to drugs as a result of something they discovered in these highly unsanitary play places. She asked to speak to her mother and had referenced the five incidences that came immediately to mind before the District Attorney told her that she needed to calm down, that she could call back when she had, and with that had hung up. Anna had dialled her mother non-stop without convincing her to answer her phone for the next half an hour. Nancy Smith only returned the calls when the two had gone home and were watching some Disney cartoon together on the couch. He had made goodnight to her and then explained to her husband that she was feeling ill with morning sickness, asking if he could cover for her at the bar that she might go home and lie down until it passed. It would be three o’clock in the morning before Edmund discovered her fib. Hopefully, he would have by that point enjoyed a shift drink too many with her staff to shower her in fault. He would go to sleep in an empty bed and she would be back to fill it in the morning.

“Mary, it is not like I am going to bring Jordan home right now,” Anna said, the corners of her lips sticky with soft caramel of which she craved more. “He is probably sleeping. I’ll just stick my head in to check in on him, hang out with my mom for a while, sleep on the couch, get up early to get us breakfast and the pretend to my son that I’d only just come.”

“That is sick, Anna,” Mary spat. “No, you know what it is? It is exactly the thing your mother would have done when you were small.”

“I’m sure she did,” Anna defended, frantically reaching around her purse, hoping to find another chocolate to fill her with an admittedly false sense of calm.

“Remember how much you resented her for most of your teens and all of your twenties?” Mary challenged. “It is one night, Anna. Go home, have some grown-up time with your husband. You need it. Your son is safe.”

“Did Edmund put you up to this?” Anna began to accuse.
“No, I actually called to either spread a rumour or confirm it to be true,” Mary said slowly.

“Oh?” Anna peeped back in surprise, suddenly remembering John, Effie and the ring, hoping that Mary had not yet gotten word of the rumour around this which she had half-started and then tried to silence at her husband’s insistence. Anna pulled off at her mother’s exit, decelerating to the new marked speed limit as she felt her heart beginning to quicken.

“Abe came home today with groceries, I was unpacking them and saw he’d bought some feminine hygiene products, which mind, he never did the entire time we were married, even when I asked him to. So, I called out to him like ‘babe … what is this?’ and half-annoyed, half-perplexed he starts explaining the intended usage, so I asked him again why he bought them and he said that it was for me – obviously - that the stores were all going to be closed for Easter and he did not want to have to go out tomorrow with everyone doing their last-minute shopping. Sure enough – I got my period about an hour ago and I demanded to know how he possibly knew that I would, and here comes the senseless gossip and speculation: You know how he spends around half of his afternoon each Monday calling London and working out the rest of the Times’ Crossword with the only MP to never have graduated university?”

She did not, but it did not surprise her. “The cornerstone of any great bromance,” Anna sighed in relief. Nothing of what Mary heard was likely to do with the text she herself had had read that morning.

“A gross misappropriation of taxpayer’s dollars,” Mary snorted.

“Is Arnold angry about it?”

Mary lowered her voice and sounded as though she covered her mouth from any prying eyes with the palm of her hand. She kept an apartment in the DC area, but Anna guessed that she and the children we staying with Abe and his boyfriend Joseph in their rented house off the Chesapeake Bay. She guessed that Mary only used the flat when John came to visit, keeping it as a kind of cover for just how close she and her ex had grown since finalizing their divorce. “Don’t repeat this at all,” Mary warned. “I shouldn’t be saying anything because I shouldn’t know, but Arnold wracks up a thousand-dollar bill from a psychic hotline each week, so I doubt our Defence Secretary gives much of a damn about the ways in which his staff uses the phone.”

“Holy shit!” Anna exclaimed.

“I know – but that actually isn’t what I wanted to run by you,” she continued swiftly, “I suppose because one has to make small talk in between comparing answers to two-down and five-across, Abe and Ban somehow came on the topic of menstruation.”

“Why?” Anna groaned. The last time she had heard of men addressing such topics, she had been in middle school and all the men she then knew had been boys. In her head she heard a conversation that seemed bound to contain the word ‘cooties’, something she considered civil servants in their mid-thirties ought to have since replace with ‘coitus’ in their personal lexicons.

“This was back a few weeks ago when I saw Thomas touching himself when we were watching TV,” Mary informed. Anna remembered in the incident. “I relayed the conversation about pleasure and personal boundaries that followed to Abe and he was fretting about not knowing what to do about how to approach these topics himself, feeling like less of a dad than I am a mom, worrying about the talks he thinks he should be the one to have in the future, when Ban interrupted that Abe should consider himself lucky that he doesn’t have daughters, or, in a wider sense, women in his domestic life. Here is where it gets weird. His eldest started get her period regularly around the same time as his wife began to gets hers – owing, in that case I guess - to an eating disorder he seems to
have spent half his life at least trying to combat,” she paused. “It is really quite sad for them both if you dwell on it for half a second, Ban and Ellie I mean.”

“That actually explains so much,” Anna murmured, pulling up in front of her mother’s house and finding most of the lights off.

“I know, right? Anyway, a few years back, your favourite in-law found himself in the position of explaining to both how to use these products and seems to have since charged himself with keeping the bathroom stocked, and, well you know how Ban can be a bit of a Nazi in the endearing sense of the word -”

“Sorry,” Anna blinked. “There is an ‘endearing’ way in which fascist totalitarianism -”

“Have you ever asked Ben or Abigail to proofread anything for you?” Mary asked.

“Fair,” Anna gave her.

“Okay. Ban noticed that the supplies he had purchased were not diminishing as quickly as he had calculated and he leapt into all of these paranoid scenarios - imagining that he daughter was pregnant, that he would thus lose custody-”

“Oh, well that is just a constant,” Anna - who herself could not bear the idea of being apart from her own child even for a single night - chastised.

“Hush! This is where it gets good. He is up late one night, consulting his wife, asking her how he might address his ward as to whether she is sexually active or not. Ellie tell him not to worry, that it is her who is ‘late’ this month and then Ban absolutely lost whatever it is that lets him keep his calm. Abe said he was cursing even in relaying all of this a few days later. Apparently, his first and only thought with regards to his wife not having gotten her period on time was that she had gone back to starving herself and that she needed to seek counselling because he just could not deal with it anymore. So, Ellie did what any woman would in that situation I suppose and sent him to the couch and the next day left for an impromptu business trip. Abe and I both googled her immediately and re-watched her speech at Davos this year - I mean she is skinny to be sure but not sickly unless something has changed dramatically in the past two, three months.”

“No,” Anna agreed. “I saw her on a video chat yesterday, she – oh my god … you don’t think?”

“No, I do. As does Abe and everyone else he has brought it up to. The weird thing is that it doesn’t even seem to have crossed her husband’s mind,” she paused. “Maybe I’m not the only one with a shit sex life.”

“Oh, Mary -”

“By chance has Edmund said anything about his little sister? Curious minds are want to inquire.”

“Actually no, but you are right. I need to go home and run this by Edmund,” Anna lied, looking for an excuse to get off the phone that she might ring her mother’s doorbell, hoping the sound to wake her son that she could nurse him and cuddle him and tell him for the hundredth time that day how wonderful he was while she searched his body for small abrasions he might have gotten while playing – cuts that her mother might not have thought to drench in disinfectant spray. Her breasts again began to drip with the milk they were want to give, a substance which Anna would continue to offer her boy until he began kindergarten in four years, not wanting to enrol him against every argument until she was sure he was ready, carrying and cuddling him on her hips until the state told her that it was passed time for her boy to begin. That same September, Mary’s daughter, her son’s
twin, would be starting second grade.

Anna would not think anything of the effects the desperation of her attachment was having on her son until many years later when he returned from college one Thanksgiving, bringing his new girlfriend, a slightly older, full-figured brunette with large, dark eyes and a deep, sultry voice with him. Even then, the doubts of her peers in which she would suddenly share would be short lived. Upon discovering that the girl was a political science major who shared her every view, Anna would find herself in love with the young woman as well and would quickly come to want her to fill the Hewlett home with grandchildren, which the girl then obediently would, quite to Anna’s liking, almost as soon as she told her son she was alright with them sharing a room for the weekend, thus creating a financial situation for the young couple that would force them to move back under her roof while they balanced babies and undergraduate academic demands. As a graduation present, Anna would give the pair a patch of land a promise to finance the building of a house – a process that would take five years too long though the construction site could be seen from her own kitchen window. They would stay with her and Edmund all the while, and Anna would stay up late most nights, providing her son with the company and conversation he continued to crave from her though he had a wife to play this role.

In contrast, Anna’s yet unborn daughters would hate her in the same way she had hated her own mother in adolescence, but after the transformative events of marriage and childbearing had made them into her mirror images in both body and mind, she would enjoy a closeness with them as well, one which few parents could claim to have with their adult children. Like their brother before them, the girls would each move into new mansions on the same street as that which they had grown up on and would trust their blessed mother’s wisdom on all matters.

At present, Anna could not give a damn if her children would have another cousin called Tarleton they might meet a handful of times in the whole of their lives. They would always have her. That was enough.

“Well, don’t let me keep you,” Mary said. “I need to get to bed soon anyway – did I tell you who is stopping by tomorrow morning?”

“Well, don’t let me keep you,” Mary said. “I need to get to bed soon anyway – did I tell you who is stopping by tomorrow morning?”

“Who?” Anna asked, slouching in her seat when she saw her mother’s door creak open, a large silhouette and a long shadow that seemed darker than the night’s sky.

“Freddie! Freddie Morgan,” Mary exclaimed. “You know Peggy’s friend? The one who did your hair for the wedding?”

“Oh?”

“He is in town for some spur of the moment gay rights march up on Capitol Hill which Joseph is also taking part in and he agreed to give me highlights beforehand.”

“Yay,” Anna smiled.

“Here is where it gets fun. Freddie is the only person Arnold will let touch his hair, and he hinted at coming by tomorrow too so that he doesn’t need to make an extra stop next time he goes home to Pennsylvania.”

“He isn’t going home for Easter?” Anna wondered.

“No. And no, Abe won’t tell me why beyond that it has nothing to do with North Korea.”

“Well, that is a relief I guess.”
“Have you ever seen them together?” Mary laughed.

“Arnold and Kim?”

“Arnold and Freddie. It is amazing – Freddie hits on him the whole time and even gets Arnold to flirt back a bit, but in a way that it is clear he has no idea what is going on.”

“Like he doesn’t realise that he is …”

“No. Not a clue. I’ll send you video is anything good comes from it.”

“Send me pics of your hair, too,” Anna said, now desperate to get her friend off the phone as she watched her mother approach, hands fisted up against her hips, a posture that had a way of making Anna feel small even still. Mary continued to speak. Anna had to change tactics.

“Mary – by chance, does Arnold know that you quite nearly killed him, or -”

“ANNA, WHAT ON GOD’S GREEN EARTH ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE AT THIS HOUR?!?” her mother demanded as she pounded on the window of the SUV, though, Anna was certain, she knew full well what she was up to. Nancy Smith had smothered her children in attention and affection for the whole of their lives as well. Having turned out to be exactly like the woman whose every physical trait she also shared, Anna hoped that when she reached the age at which her mother was now, she at the very least would avoid sharing in the woman’s new-found sense of hypocrisy. She wanted to be near her son, if anyone on this green earth of God’s should understand, it was her own mother, this woman who continued to shout and scold.

“Jesus. You went to your moms? I knew it,” Mary sighed. “Anna, you need to cut the umbilical cord before -”

Anna rolled down her window before Mary thought to clarify which one she meant. “I’m pregnant,” she said, hoping to satisfy the two women who had become one in their criticism. “I’m pregnant and I have to pee!”

The largest guest bedroom had become a nursery for the girls. Estelle stared up at him with her blank, blue eyes as he wiped her clean, folding and pinning a new diaper, trying to bring the baby to laughter by contorting his face. Her identical twin Celeste had blessedly already fallen asleep. Jeanne, their older sister, who had a concept of bed but not of time, was in the process of pouting over the fact that her half-brother got to stay up half an hour later than she did, dragging out the eternity she estimated. Papa made up for this perceived unfairness as best he could with a book, but tonight it seemed he was a poor substitute for the cartoon which the girl’s mother had told her she was too young for. Abe frowned, remembering their son meanly sticking out his tongue at the toddler upon hearing this statement. He wondered if he might have done better to have sent the boy to his room right then and there, if a show of solidarity would have helped his young ward rest easier.

“Daddy does the voices,” Jeanene pouted.

“Trade?” Abe offered his boyfriend. Joseph rose and Abe took the place he had occupied on the ‘big-girl-bed’ of which Jeanne was very proud. She still had a crib in New York she told him, in the house she only referred to by the name of the state it was in. As the child fell asleep in his arms, he
found himself wondering how long she had thought of Alexandria as her home, how long he had been her ‘daddy’ and Joseph her ‘papa.’

Jeanne Graves Simcoe had a father with whom she shared a name and little else. She called him by this title without much association with the word and Abe had doubts as to if she truly comprehended its meaning. Two weeks after the last time he had ever lain with a woman, his then-wife had told him she was pregnant. Jeanne was born eight months later. In the interim it had already become apparent that she was not his. When he and Mary separated for reasons not fully related to the enemy she had invited into their bed, the last thing he had ever expected was to be raising the child she then carried as though she were his own, that come to love her and her sisters as such.

Abe placed a kiss on Jeanne’s forehead and tucked her into her sheets, certain she was dreaming that she was one of the dancers on the runner that adorned the nursery wall. Soon, he thought, she would need a room on her own and at that point he and Joseph would need to renovate their home office or they would no longer be able to offer the visitors they received for shorter stays a bed to sleep in. One way or another, Abe found himself smiling, he was going to need to paint another wall pink and put up more pretty wallpaper. He would never have guessed that he would come to like the colour or that he would become quite so used to seeing it in excess.

He admired the room and the man who had helped him redecorate it to accommodate the recent editions to the family they had never entirely intended to build as his boyfriend sand softly to the youngest Simcoe sister. Sometimes, they would hear other queer couples talk about finding a surrogate. In private, they would joke that they already had one.

Their was a strange set up, to be sure. When he was young enough that mistakes found a way of working out, Abe had gotten a girl named Mary pregnant at a party. In accordance with what society had instilled in him was the right thing to do, Abe proposed and the two married. For around two years, their union had been a pleasant one, but Mary was given to envy and Abe to evasion. They might have carried on this way eternally out of stubbornness and spite had he not sent her a text asking her to pick him up at a bar on the same night the man she now called her boyfriend found himself in a fistfight with an American hero. Mary hit the man when he fell in front of her car, and, thinking him dead, had enlisted a stranger’s help in hiding the body.

As things worked out, Abe’s boss at the time had been the one to find the missing senator and he had been enlisted in keeping the man hidden, working for months to help then- Senator Arnold escape without having it endanger his family. Mary and Abe were over long before this episode, but upon discovering one another’s roles in the crime and coverup, they decided to admit to their defeat. The divorce was amicable. Friendship followed and when work made her relocate to Washington, they had become something of a family once more. Mary had an apartment in the capitol but she and her four children secretly slept under the roof Abe shared with his boyfriend.

Coming out to Mary, even when they were over, had been among the hardest conversations he had ever had. He understood her reasons for keeping quiet about her residence to the man she had first met at a crime scene, though, insofar as he could tell, she and John were through in ways that the two of them simply were not and would never quite be. Mary was the mother of his child. The children she had born John, in contrast, did nothing to hold the Englishman’s interest. Though he was active and attentive when Mary had been pregnant with his first, by the time Jeanne had been born he had all but lost interest. When first she had cried to him about it, Abe’s assumption was that John created the same distance between himself and his daughter that Edmund did with his son. That in both cases this had to do with British upper-class attitudes and behaviours that clashed with the American hands-on approach. But loath to touch his son as he was, Edmund Hewlett could at least afford the boy a smile. John Graves Simcoe merely sulked.
Luckily, the three girls had two men who were ready and willing to take their father’s place.

Joseph Sturridge was twenty-four, younger than Abe but far more mature than he had been at that age. A surrogate father of four now, he had been a frat boy when they met, a college student who had found part time work when his father discovered aspects of his lifestyle that made him stop paying the bills – boys and the interest Joseph had in them being a bigger problem for the man than beer or the morning classes he did not attend after nights spent drinking.

Joseph had been on an academic probation, working at an Irish Pub in Albany to make ends meet when the establishment happened to serve as the venue for a wedding reception. At the time, Abe, who had dropped out of college to pursue music, was still attempting to do just that. The two had first spoken during an afternoon sound check. Abe, whose band was providing the entertainment for his best friend’s reception, had asked for a fruity cocktail and been given a beer and a shrug. Technically, Joseph said, they were not open and he was not working. Abe smiled. The lad had been more forthcoming when he later asked for his number.

They kept in touch but were surprised all the same when they ran into one another at a Whole Foods in Alexandria where they both found themselves living a year after Joseph had been too lazy to make him a mixed drink.

In the capitol, Joseph had found that the same lack of desire under which his schoolwork had long-suffered was something of an asset. He was currently working as an aide to Steven Mnuchin - which meant nothing in and of itself and required him to do even less, having been appointed to the US Treasury when the president elect saw him at a fundraising event one of his father’s friends was hosting and decided in his rather bigoted way of speaking that Joseph looked ‘like a Jew’ (which he was) and therefore ‘was probably good with money’ (which he also happened to be.) That nothing of what he did in Washington had much of anything to do with the job he had been assigned interested no one. Trump himself spent more time of Twitter than he did engaging in the businesses of governance. In the words of The White House, Joseph Sturridge was draining the swamp by virtue of his inexperience. In practice, this tended to play out in ways that did not quite live up to a campaign promise. Three months into his employment, Joseph received a $60,000 bonus when his direct boss discovered that such was in his authority and that his aide had shown up to work on time each day. In truth, Joseph had simply learned how to log into the payroll system on his mobile and on days when he was keener on the snooze button than on a suit and tie, his attendance could be vouched for all the same. Mnuchin, he told Abe when this had raised an eyebrow, had no idea who he even was, having so far spent most of his tenure taking his beautiful wife on holiday using military as opposed to commercial aircraft, again, simply because he could. It didn’t matter how much this was costing tax payers, Joseph smarted. Mexico, after all, was going to pay for The Wall.

He told Abe this on their first date, asking him out then and there and bringing him back to the five-bedroom waterfront property they now shared, making him dinner and the drink he ordered months before. He leased the property from the wife of a lobbyist for less than $100 a week, which was legal if not entirely ethical. Abe would have had more of a problem with it were it not for his ex, her children, and the home he could comfortably offer.

“I’m worried about this march,” he said when his boyfriend laid little Estelle down in her crib. “What will happen if you lose your job over this?”

“I will follow in the footsteps of every other casualty of this administration and write a book about the system of sustained chaos.”

Abe gave him a half smile. To his credit, Joseph had been preparing for this eventuality since a series of favours had found him employed in the civil service. He kept a journal filled with stories of a
typical work day, stories, that whenever he shared them, never failed to amuse. The two did not often talk about work, however. Abe, who served as a secretary to the Secretary who had to decide which soft target it was within American oil interests to bombard was sometimes jealous of the relative ease and quick reward enjoyed by aides of any other cabinet member. The Department of Defence was still a serious institution.

His boss Benedict Arnold called him ‘Private’ (which he was not), quoted ancient Romans (or, more likely, Mike Duncan and/or Dan Carlin) incoherently, made everyone in his office play in his Fantasy Football league (lest he call them “commie bastards”) and made Abe specifically answer the phone, that he might offer diplomats an excuse as to why the Defence Secretary could not be disturbed (that had nothing to do with the fact that he was consulting an oracle at a 900-number.) For reasons of their personal history, Abe was the only person Arnold trusted. Abe, in turn, both respected and resented the man. There were days when his nine to five felt more like a ten-month deployment. For all of the dystopian adventures Joseph had a laugh at, Abe hardly ever had anything from work worth sharing over dinner with the man who shared his life.

“I care about this,” Joseph told him softly, putting his arms low around his waist.

“I care about you,” Abe responded, pulling his boyfriend into a soft kiss. Joseph was not himself a tall man, but Abe still needed to stand on the balls of his feet in order to meet his lips. When they touched, he felt he could fly. “Need me to put the boy to bed?” Joseph offered.

“No, I … Thomas is generally pretty good about going on his own. I’ll just sick my head in to make sure the lights are out. Wait up for me?” he fluttered.

“Always.”

Abe found his ex on the back porch look out at the bay, in the exact place he might have expected to see her. She extinguished her cigarette and rose to stop him from tossing the used diapers into the plastic rubbish bin, telling him that John had changed his plans. He was flying into Dulles next week instead of JFK, she needed this particular trash to create the impression that she and the girls, at least, had been living in Tyson’s Corner for the past two weeks. Abe ignored her request and turned to challenge it – did she not typically bring her rubbish to the curb? Mary told him that there was no scheduled trash collection, that this information was available online, that John could check. This made Abe furious. John Graves Simcoe was a formidable presence, but he could not imagine Mary being afraid of him, and, if she was, he could not imagine her bringing her children into a situation she did not trust. She continued that the weather had been warm, that the clothes she left in the hamper were all from winter, that she should not have done laundry today. Her phone lit up.

“Do you want me -”

“No,” she sighed. “I’ll just take a bag of your trash back to mine and put a few clothes I don’t intend to dress the girls in in the coming days underneath. They will inherit the stench, I’ll wash the winter things and make a donation pile for the next time Ben’s dad is doing a drive at the church.”

“Do you hear yourself? Mary, what did he say?”

“Nothing! He just texted me his updated ticket information. I want to see him, I just – I wish he had given me more warning, that is all,” she forced herself to smile. Abe shook his head. He would need
to try a new tactic.

“Did you talk to Anna?” he asked after a moment when he remembered that he had asked her to casually inquire about the health of her sister-in-law, thinking it would be stranger if the question had come from him.

“Yep,” Mary elongated as she crossed her arms. Abe knew from the tone he should not press this conversation either, but in realising that he himself had come to memorise his ex’s menstrual cycle, his interest in the question that had plagued him a handful on Mondays prior had been renewed. Her general posture might work to his favour. Abe’s ex could always be persuaded to talk about her to talk about her problems if she could tie them to Anna, however loosely.

“And?” his eyes widened slightly in anticipation.

“And I’ve really had it up to here with her. When I rang she was on the road to her mom’s, probably stuffing herself full of chocolate-flavoured sedatives, absolutely distraught over the idea of Jordan going to bed without her having kissed him goodnight,” she began to rant. He saw his role.

“Jesus,” Abe sighed. “I’m not surprised at all though. I always kind of knew she would turn into her mother one of these days.”

“I miss when she used to take that as an insult,” Mary said as she lit another fag from the box she kept on the back-porch table. On the rare occasion John Graves Simcoe came to their home, Abe’s domestic partner pretended the pack was his. Joseph had quit three years before. Mary now smoked a pack a day and had all throughout her third pregnancy. He watched an inch of paper quickly turn to ash as she inhaled, feeling that he held more secrets around her than he had when she had been his wife. “I tried to tell her that such is exactly the sort of behaviour Nancy was like to have engaged in when she was little and she took that as an argument for her case, forgetting, I guess, her every individual fault. I suppose her son, too is going to grow up to be selfish and impossible to satisfy.”

“I can see that,” Abe smiled. Mary gave him an odd look. “No, I was just thinking about how much I dodged a bullet in that one.”

“You think I was a better wife than Anna would have been?” she seemed to plead.

“Defiantly. I just changed three diapers and still think you are a better mom. Love Anna, but,” he paused, “O’rite, do you want to hear something evil?"

“Always,” Mary smiled.

“When we were in high school she used to be really rebellious, well, maybe ‘rebellious’ is the wrong word giving that she got straight a’s and was on every damn team and in most clubs, but everything her mother did, Anna just wanted no part of. Anyway, I had tried to end things with her a few times at this point, having come to realise that I was never going to love her quite in the way she loved me,” he paused, understanding the awkwardness of this admission on every level. Mary seemed not to mind. “One day we were studying for finals or something and she was stress eating as she tends to –”

“Wait, do you think that is why -” Mary interrupted, widely gesturing at the air around her body to suggest that of the woman who was sometimes their mutual friend.

“Oh, a hundred percent. Come on, Mary, the guy she was planning to marry in an act of immigration fraud became a murder suspect the morning she lost her job. And what has her life been since? Politics, pampers, and somehow pretending that the wealth she now enjoys was in any way obtained
legally. Anna is fairly high-minded, so I would hazard to think her new-found body confidence comes from her figure being the only thing she can openly enjoy about herself without falling into guilt. I like it though. It suits her.” Anna laughed when she referred to herself as fat. It was true without being honest. She had always been massive in most ways unseen and had simply grown bored with pretending to be fully mortal.

Mary Woodhull rolled her eyes. “I fucking hate her. How the hell does anyone possibly look better after gaining seventy, eighty pounds? It is not right. It should not be allowed.”

“Sold her soul to the devil,” Abe suggested.

“Or just married into his family.”

“Could well be. When we were at school though, telling her that she was starting to look like her mother was enough to devastate her for days, weeks. I literally broke up with her telling her she was too fat to bring to prom.”

“Oh my god!” Mary exclaimed.

“I know, that was a bit dickish of me.”

“Remind her of that sometime. I would love to see if you could still get any kind of reaction,” she smiled darkly. “You know what I did once? When we rooming together freshmen year of university, I bought her a dress she said she liked for Christmas, but after spending Thanksgiving with her family, meeting Nancy and learning all of Anna’s innermost paranoias that we now know were a self-fulfilling prophesy of the worst kind, I bought it a size or two too big, and really, only because I wanted to eat all of the Christmas cookies we had bought by myself while I was studying,” Mary tried not to laugh. “Bitch wore the same oversized hoodie for the rest of term.”

“And the cookies?” Abe inquired.

Mary brushed her shoulder with the hand not holding a cigarette. “Oh, I always get my blood, son.”

“How did we not work out?” he grinned.

“As a couple? I can think of a reason or two.”

“Communication, ‘innit?” Abe suggested, recalling that they had had this conversation once before when Mary’s face took on an ugly twist.

“Oh my God, please stop talking like that,” she scolded in the wailing tones he had grown used to while they were wed. “Please, please tell me it was at least conscious, that you are being obnoxious on purpose.” In their divorce, Abe Woodhull had gotten the house he had inherited from his father, which he immediately turned around and sold to Anna and Edmund Hewlett, angering the old judge perhaps more than it would have had the courts afforded Mary everything. He had joint custody of their son Thomas, and, for the few weeks that elapsed between their separation and his becoming gainfully employed, alimony, which he would have felt worse for taking had he not been half sure Simcoe had been made to front the bill. He would have given all of this gladly, however, for the one thing he truly missed about his prior marital status – the ability to tune Mary out when she wailed in this way.

“What?” he barked.

“O’rite, ’Innit?” Mary repeated in a deepened voice.
Abe blinked. “Oh, shit … no I …”

“Be honest, do you have a crush on him?” she began to tease.

By ‘him’ Mary was referring to Banastre Tarleton, Ban to his friends and to reporters who could not spell his given name. ‘Crush’ was too far, but Abe had come to love him for all of the paradox reasons he had hated himself. Ban was loud and lively, energetic and opinionated while at once being undereducated amongst his given company and unskilled in the profession fate had forced upon him. He had been born into a prominent political family, a younger son of a well-respected man, a disappointment when judged against his siblings on any merit. He struggled to separate his civilian existence from his military career and the choices he had made in the latter caused him to suffer the constant scorn of those who would never be asked to make the same sacrifices for country, and, in Ban’s case, Queen. They had met first two years ago at the same pub that had then employed Joseph, shortly after Ban had gotten one of the worst phone calls of his life. Abe felt as though he were glimpsing his own situation from the outside, and, curiously, felt as though he finally knew what to make of it. He helped Ban coordinate with old enemies and watched him make a few new ones when he promptly resigned his post, a few weeks before his commission was set to expire. They spoke for hours afterward and had their setting been anywhere but the lot behind a bar, Abe still considered he would have been in a capacity to settle his own affairs that night before the situation escape what little control he had over it.

When he later wound up working for the man he had had a hand in holding captive, Ban had secured himself a seat in parliament a special election following Brexit and Cameron’s subsequent abdication and dissolving of his government. He brought to the office the same tenacity he had shown on the battlefield, and, after defeating the FA (which he explained was the most powerful English institution, though, Google informed, was simply the governing body of their national sport) he had been appointed to several committees, one of which required him to remain in communication with the United States Department of Defence, when Abe answered the phones.

He had taken to calling on Mondays, comparing answers to crosswords while waiting for the man to whom he was required to speak to come into the right mindset to suffer a conversation. Arnold resented Ban for reasons of the Second Amendment, the latter criticising this element of the American Constitution after every school shooting, which were common enough in the land of the free that Abe had had this conversation often enough to understand the basis of Ban’s views though he disagreed with the premise. Ban had seen a teenager in Iraq kill a number of his classmates on his first deployment when he himself had barely been older than the perpetrator. Abe grasped that such was upsetting, but maintained that the American people giving up their arms on their own soil would mean that the terrorists had won. They would agree to disagree until the next national tragedy caused decent Americans to ask how this possibly could have happened and snobby Europeans to be want to tell them - without having the slightest understanding of their history and culture. This, Abe maintained, was a course western countries only got to take in former soviet ones with predominantly Muslim populations in which they were attempting to establish a functioning democracy; Britain was not and would never be in a position to criticise anything about the city on the hill that stood as a shining example for the rest of the world.

Arnold’s personal view on all of this was far less idealistic – Ban Tarleton hated freedom (as it was defined by the NRA) because he would never again be able to shoot a gun himself. Because Arnold had lead the charge that served to cripple the colonel, he could not speak to him when Ban was of the mind to give his opinion of domestic policy and Abe was happy to act as a buffer between them.

Mostly though, the two talked about their own children, both finding themselves in domestic situations that saw them raising the daughters of their exs, both dealing with the biological father of the girls’ in the periphery, both struggling at times to have a life with their new partners giving their
guardianship situations.

It was not a crush, it was a shared understanding. Abe Woodhull genuinely looked forward to going to work on Mondays, but because of Tarleton’s reputation, this was impossible to explain to anyone who only knew the man through his press.

“Even if we were just speaking in terms of hyper-conservative, insultingly young, almost handsome European politicians whom I’d bed, he wouldn’t top my list,” he told her instead.

“Is that list long?” Mary stifled a laugh.

“Nein, die ist Kurz.”

“What?” she squinted.

“As in Sebastian Kurz, the Austrian Chancellor?” Abe tried.

“I have no idea who that is.”

“The one time I make a pun …”

“I don’t speak German.”

“I took two years in high school.”

“Do you call the Austrian Chancellor to do crosswords too?”

“No,” he smiled. “Ban and I have something special there. Did you ask Anna what she thinks about Ellie?”

“I don’t think she does. Think about her I mean. But yeah, she agrees based on what you said.”

“I think I should tell him.”

“I think you should let this go,” Mary warned, again in the nagging voice he hated.

“Why is that?”

She lit another cigarette. Even though she did not smoke in the house or in the hours the children might see her indulge this addiction, he hated that she did this to herself. The white tips of Mary’s French manicure were now always stained yellow within a few days of getting them done, she had grown thin past the point of allure and whenever Abe made a comment, trying to appeal to her health through her old vanities, Mary would answer with something that alarmed him more. She would tell him that he had no place to comment, that he had never found her attractive to begin with, that it did not matter to the man she was with, who had stopped finding her beautiful when their first child together left her with loose excesses of skin. John’s aversion to her had spread to their children. ‘At least,’ she said, ‘for all of our problems, I never had to question if you loved Thomas or not.’

Outside, in the slight chill of early spring, Mary wrapped herself in an oversized poncho that made her seem all the smaller. Abe had a mind to forbid her from seeing Simcoe when he came to visit, from exposing the daughters he had begun to think of as his own to this demon who cursed them with his name. At Easter, he would have to ask his father’s advice on the matter, inquire into any legal routes he might have available to help him keep the sweet children safe from the psychological torment that was the presence of John Graves Simcoe. He could not have this conversation with Mary, who said she ‘loved him’, or with Ban, who said Simcoe was ‘o’rite’, whatever the fuck either
of those things meant.

“Listen,” she told him after a long inhale, “I keep up with all of the pseudo royal news with Harry and Meghan coming up. Ellie Hew spent a few days alone in Liverpool recently.”

“And? The main office of her charity is there.”

“Jesus Abe, think about the news you do pay attention to – the referendum they are about to have in Ireland, for example. Why do young women go to Liverpool alone? What is the main touristic draw for that demographic?” she demanded.

Abortion. That was the word she did not want to say.

“I still think I need to say something.”

“Why? Why would you do that to your friend? We don’t even know that she was pregnant but pretending that she such was in fact the case and she no longer is, either he knows and has made his peace with it – or is trying to – or he doesn’t and bringing this to light would destroy his marriage. I imagine he shares his late father’s pro-life views.”

“If his wife is keeping a secret like that, their marriage is already over,” Abe maintained. “Look at us, fuck – look at you and John now.”

“We are not having problems,” Mary defended. “Not like that. How dare -”

“You cannot communicate with the man. You are so afraid of his mood swings, of him coming to visit to find that his daughters have a loving home that you are actually going to pack shit – literal shit – into the boot of your Jeep to make it look like you are living in a tiny apartment just so he won’t be threatened by the concept that you have friendships. Jesus Christ, Mary, I have half a mind to ring up Child Protective Services, Women’s rights groups – put that out!” he said of the cigarette, grabbing it before she could again bring it to her lips. “Can’t you see what he has done to you?”

“I love him!”

“You ‘love’ the idea of being in a relationship, but you’re not – and thank God you’re not! Why do we all have to pretend that this is something that exists when not even John is willing -”

“It wasn’t always this way,” she choked. Abe put his arms around her. She began to cry into his chest.

“No. Back when you were partners in crime you talked about everything because you felt you had to. You still do, Mary. You have to tell him.”

“I can’t. He hates you.”

“Believe me, it is mutual.”

She had known who he was before he introduced himself and perhaps that is what formed the basis of the attraction. She knew him from his dark curls and darker eyes, his deep voice and the words he spoke. Barrel-chested and broad-shouldered, Peggy Shippen had to crane her neck to meet the eyes that threatened to steal her and offered to buy her a drink.
“I work here,” she told him with a small wink.

“I’m in Setauket so infrequently I forget that this is in only bar in town,” he smiled back. “Want to go somewhere where we can’t both drink for free? Hank Smith,” he extended his hand. Peggy let him lift hers to his lips to kiss after offer it in a shake.

She had first called out to him from the stage of her set when she saw him with his phone out, playfully harassing him by asking him to google a figure for her as he seemed to have better mobile reception than Strong Tavern ordinarily lent itself to. “Oh, believe me, if it were a choice between us literally anything on YouTube, I wouldn’t be paying attention to myself either.”

“I’m barely listening to you know,” Aberdeen chimed in, rolling her eyes. Giving the exact GDP of the congressional district Peggy had called into question, her boss’ little brother invited himself into the debate for a few minutes as audience members were encouraged to do whenever they did a live show. At a wine bar in Brooklyn where the delta blues played late into the night, he apologised for having his phone out, he worked for another New York mayor and the man could prove a bit of a chore. Peggy was happy not to hear him say de Blasio, that he seemed content not to drop names common to his life or hers. She knew he was a political strategist, that his sister was the mayor of the small town he had grown up in, that his mother was the long-serving District Attorney and that all four of his grandparents had been judges. This did not come up in conversation. Nor, thankful, did he make any allusion to her father, to the Defence Secretary to whom she had been linked in the press, or to the man she had actually been seeing at the time when then-senator Benedict Arnold had been the only item in the news. Of all the dates she had agreed to go on since, Hank was the only one who seemed uninterested in the parts of her past about which he likely knew everything there was to know already.

He was good at conversation and finding grounds of commonality. As his physique attested, he had grown up playing American Football and had done so at university until suffering a concussion and choosing not to become a statistic. Peggy had been a cheerleader in middle and high school. They had both attended ivy league universities and had both been chapter heads in the Greek System. That Peggy was no longer affiliated she did not mention and he did not ask.

Hank had a certain charm to him though he was not really her type. He was more masculine than metropolitan, more easy-going than elegant. The only point of comparison Peggy had let herself experience was John André, who was effeminate, manipulative and vindictive and appealed to these same aspects of herself. Her heart had been shattered when the affair ended and it had taken years for her to recover from the stain. In that time, she had lost faith in every ideal she still strived to embody and knew that for deeply private reasons the last place she should seek them anew was in the arms of Anna’s little brother.

Still, she asked him if he wanted to take her home.

Want, he did, but home was, at the moment, slightly complicated. He was staying with his mother while his apartment was being renovated. He could offer her a construction site or the District Attorney’s promised condemnation in the morning. Could they take this to hers? Hers was the flat over the bar, where she had skipped out of half of her shift on one of the busiest nights of the week, she reminded him. She traced along the buttons of his shirt, feeling a stomach that, like his sister’s, contained a great deal of muscle within its bulk. Peggy felt herself grow weak for reasons she knew to be wrong. His mother, she told him, she could handle. She had interviewed her before.

Hank told her that he thought that was probably the first episode of Splitting Headache he had ever listened to and chit chat turned to kisses in the back of the cab. The two were discovered in the doorway by the mother Hank feared and the sister whom neither had expected, whose wide eyes
narrowed until they closed. Anna shook her head, opened them, and in the height of manners, invited Peggy to join her in the drawing room. Nancy was less coy in telling her son she needed to have a word with him (that word being “Republican!” as Peggy would hear repeated throughout the night.)

The optical power play that followed when she accompanied Anna into the back rooms at her request made Peggy feel weak in ways she had not entirely anticipated and would never confess to, for in accordance with the hold doctrine of the Bible and the Republican National Committee, homosexuality was an abomination. Anna offered her a seat in the middle of one of the drawing room’s sofas and placed herself in a small chair that struggle to contain her mass before the glowing embers of the fireplace.

The effect was overpowering.

Anna’s long, dark hair took on the appearance of fiery wings as the last of the flames found her natural highlights, making her silhouette share the deep red of her lips. In the fading light her visible cellulite and stretchmarks took on the appearance of scales. The comparative smallness of the stool made Anna – who alone was quite a bit bigger than Peggy by every measurement- seem to double her in size.

Peggy Shippen sat before a dragon, entirely unarmed.

Anna Hewlett, smiling over her small victory, offered her conquered coffee and called upon a maid to fetch a canister from the kitchen. She herself drank a blood broth which she said was good for the baby as she unconsciously, or, perhaps, very knowingly, traced the length of her large belly from the cleavage of her breasts down to the parts of her Peggy could only imagine – and to her deep shame, imagine, she did.

Peggy struggled to place exactly when she had begun to have erotic fantasies around the woman who employed her part time, who had convinced her to transfer to her alma mater, to stay in New York. She could not recall if this predated the heartbreak of John André, if the attraction was rooted in anything that happened between she and Anna earlier than that, for she had known the woman since she was a teenager beginning to worry at the fact that she did not seem to find boys as attractive as her girlfriends who spoke of the opposite sex in whispers with an excitement she could never quite bring herself to share in.

Anna’s voice was sexy and sultry. Since returning from Albany she seemed more beautiful each day, each moment, each glance Peggy snuck in shame - the dreams that came to her at night with her hand between her thighs assaulting her conscious mind whenever Anna was near. Now, she felt her expression must have confessed the sins of her soul as she watched Anna lick blood from her full lips, wishing she had been invited to share in its taste. What frightened Peggy the most in the moment was not that Anna had created of herself an intimidation in the obvious ways, but that this dragon of a woman was in such control of her sexuality she could use it to summon demons.

Anna knew her every secret.

In that moment, Peggy was certain of it. She felt that she was wet and fought the urge to weep over a love she would never know.

“Peggy,” Anna said softly, reaching out with a sharp talon disguised as a perfectly manicured hand. Peggy hid her own nails in her palm, remembering that hers were once equally as kept and cared for when she had been a sorority president, when she had parents who loved her and paid for her every fancy. Anna wore the sovereign ring of her lord husband on her heart’s finger, a finger that had not swollen with a new pregnancy as Edmund claimed but rather one that had grown fat to fit the ring he had given her as the rest of her had in assuming her new role as his lady wife. Anna, who once had
chipped polish to cover the dirt and grim that had long found itself under her fingernails, now adorned herself in designer clothing – clothing, that in some cases, had been designed with her in mind, modelling on occasion when she agreed with the cause and donating all proceeds to charity, for what need had she of the money, rich as she now was. Peggy, superficial and in all ways small, felt herself shrink further as Anna continued in a tone that made her beauty all the more ethereal, “please don’t mistake my concern for condemnation. I’m not upset and I don’t disapprove, but you are quite drunk and I do not wish for you to do anything tonight that you may regret tomorrow with regards to my bother.”

Peggy could taste the blood on Anna’s warm breath. She looked into the eyes she had been pretending to stare into for the whole of the evening only to find that they were frowning. It was more than she could bear. Anna, who she worshiped in secret, who she knew she could never have even if she were as brave as she otherwise liked to think herself, did not even see her as a woman.

“Anna,” she swallowed, hoping the natural ring of her voice would be enough to mask the storm of emotions building within her, “I’m twenty-four years old. I’m an adult, capable of having sex and calling it the same thing the next day.”

Anna forced her lips together into a tight smile and excused herself. The wooden frame of the chair seemed to scream as she rose. Peggy, hearing the commotion that followed in the kitchen and understanding that she would find herself alone for quite some time, kicked off the heels that had been causing her discomfort for the past two hours. She lifted her swollen feet onto Anna’s chair to feel what little remained of her warmth.

Seeing that her stockings had run in them, she removed them as well, finding, as her hand felt her knickers under her mini skirt, that she was as wet and sticky as she feared. She continued to feel herself as she listened to the woman who had just left try to keep the calm, imagining Anna’s plump, warm fingers in the places her bony hands now had to substitute, imagining what it was to be a living goddess, to hold that much power over everyone she met until she began to moan.

Peggy had known the sensation herself, once, before André had ruined her before the world with his lies and before herself with her own truths. She reached out to the cup Anna had abandoned on the table and let herself drink the blood that had run cold. It did not surprise her at all that she rather liked the taste.

Peggy Shippen would eventually marry Hank Smith out of the same spite by which she did most things.

At present, in the quiet of Nancy Smith’s drawing room with the taste of blood on her lips, knowing nothing more of what lied in her future beyond the fact that she wanted to hurt Anna and hurt her badly by sleeping with her little brother, Peggy decided that she needed to confide something to the only person she knew would not judge her. She found her phone in her purse and dialled the number of the first boy she had ever played it straight with.

They sat around the breakfast table the next morning around coloured eggs and chemicals. That was, Mary, Abe, Joseph and Arnold sat, Freddie, who arrived in from Philadelphia too late in the evening to receive any proper hospitality, had been on his feet all morning, cutting and colouring hair. Mary was too tried to pay him much attention, the argument that had caused her to break into tears kept her up long after it was over. She flipped though the In Touch Weekly Freddie had been reading on the
train, stopping to read an occasional blurb from a “Royal Expert” that speculated about the upcoming marriage ceremony between Britain’s red-haired prince and an American actress when she saw a name she knew.

“No,” she frowned, murmuring to herself.

“Hm?” Joseph inquired. She folded the magazine and held up the page in question for his examination. “They are giving Ellie Hewlett a six in ten chance of being a bridesmaid. That is impossible. I would say those are her chances of securing an invite.”

“Oh, because of Abe’s work husband?”

Before she could respond with all that she learned of pomp and protocol form Anna and Edmund who were required to appear, Freddie broke in with a dramatic sigh, “Personally, I want him to come to America and save our ship from sinking.”

“One day your prince will come,” Abe chuckled. Arnold held up his hands in protest, forbidding Freddie or his scissors further access to the shorter hair that now required frequent trims.

“What are your view on the second amendment?” he demanded. Mary caught Abe’s eye and smiled her understanding. Arnold, she reasoned, must have considered most in Freddie’s branch to be ‘snowflakes’ or whatever other noun was misused as an insult toward the liberally-minded youth. Freddie Morgan had escaped this suspicion simply on the virtue of being friends with Peggy Shippen, who, no matter what else the Secretary of Defence might think of her, had conservative credentials that could not be questioned. Even working in Washington, Mary was surprised to find the things that were becoming subject to partisan lines, wondering if Arnold would walk away with his hair slightly longer on one side or if they could all expect the former senator to drop a campaign season’s worth of rhetoric at their kitchen table.

“On guns,” she clarified.

“Oh honey, I’m always packing,” Freddie winked. This seemed to meet with Arnold’s satisfaction. “Wanna feel?” the hairdresser offered, thrusting his lower torso into eye-view of the cabinet member, lifting Arnold’s hand and attaching it to the hip of his fitted jeans.

“.45?” Arnold smiled. Mary wondered if she could reach for her phone without it being too obvious, remembering that she had promised to send Anna evidence of this flirtation.

“Babe, you don’t need to stop there,” Freddie said.

“I think you do,” Abe snorted.

Mary dropped her head as she held back a laugh. Freddie yelled at her. Her hair had needed so much foil that he had been forced to use some from the kitchen. It had been more work than he anticipated and as such she was going to sit still until the bleach had done its work. With that he returned his attention to Arnold who had since lost interest in Freddie’s dark wash jeans and all that they concealed.

“Right,” he said, slightly disappointed as he returned to his other morning job. “I’ll just be here … saving myself for Sir Banastre, who attacked his own party on their stance on gay rights. Bless.”

Arnold raised an eyebrow. What had happened, to the best of Mary’s recollection, was that Tarleton had said that family was the core unit of society and that two people who loved each other and who could provide a stable home, should not be denied the right to do so based on gender. He then went on to provide a cost-benefit analysis, explaining essential services the government would be able to
invest less into if same-sex couples were required to pay taxes on items that the presently got to deduct. No one who saw the first two minutes of the speech as a victory for equality cared much about the rest. Mary hoped that Freddie would not expand either. Abe did not need a reminder to ring a man whom he had met on all of two occasions on a holiday weekend to tell him that his wife may have had an abortion rather than a relapse of an eating disorder. She gave her ex-husband a hard look he did not seem to notice.

“Have you listened to the latest Splitting Headache yet?” Joseph asked the table.

“I didn’t know it was up,” Abe replied.

“Edmund doesn’t bother to edit the shows in which his brother-in-law gets a mention,” Mary explained, careful not to say ‘Hewlett’ or refer to Tarleton in any way apart from his relation to a man she knew Abe did not think much of.

“I know and it is glorious, especially at a live recording,” Joseph smiled.

“Well, be that as it may, I for one can’t stand to hear more of Peggy Shippen’s voice today. Got enough of her yesterday on my lunch break to last me,” Freddie asserted. Arnold smiled and the two shared a look too long. Mary reached her phone out of her pocket, snapped a picture while these very different men seemed lost in each other’s eyes and edited cartoonish hearts onto it before texting it to her best friend with the caption >> I think Arnold took to keeping his sides trimmed short just to have an excuse to feel Freddie’s soft touch. <<

>>Keen as you know I also am on fanfiction,<< came Anna’s response a minute later, >>I think Arnold’s upgrade had more to do with this man:<< She attached a picture of Kim Jong-un, followed by one of him and Arnold at a summit the week before, both with their hair cut in a strikingly similar style Mary could not believe she had not noticed before. She remembered Anna putting away her new-mother paranoia momentarily the night before to ask her if she had ever seen Arnold and Kim together, understanding first now the reference. As she tried to think of a witty reply, she returned to staring at the subtle flirtations. Arnold was entertaining Freddie with vague details of a call he received last night. Someone with whom he had a rather short press-based relationship had told him in tears that she was sleeping with the younger brother of someone she quite fancied as a form of revenge. That she hated herself for it.

Mary leaned in, forgetting all about the Supreme Leader of the hermit kingdom with nuclear capabilities as she focused all of her attention on the man at the table with the complimenting coiffure.

“I understood why she was telling me but couldn’t help to feel this sense of schadenfreude about the whole thing,” Arnold said.

“Oh, darling, as long as we are keeping names out of it, Peggy gave me a lot of this same narrative at lunch yesterday and I can expand. The ‘crush’ bought an engagement ring for their actual partner but then ended up followed our girl back to her hotel room and um … put it on her finger instead. Scandalous!”

“Never saw that coming,” Arnold squinted. “I would really like the see the sex tape though.”

“That is not at all my orientation but, you know, so would I,” Freddie considered.

Mary felt the world stop. John had told her when last they spoke that his gorgeous ex Effie was now dating his little brother. She said she would call him back. She had not.
Abe was right about their relationship. She and John were over and he had moved on to someone else. Ignoring Freddie’s fussing, she excused herself from the table and went out back for a cigarette. Lighting it, she remembered just how much she liked to watch things burn.

Chapter End Notes

It can be that I owe you extensive notes on this chapter, but giving my real-life situation, at the moment I haven’t the time to provide such. Still, I find that I have to give credit where credit is due:

Every single detail about Steven Mnuchin was unashamedly lifted from the news. Since I have already told you everything you will ever need to know about the US Treasury Secretary, [here is an article about his wife, Louise Linton](https://example.com), which I promise is worth the read.

I will likely be back in a few days to annotate other details that I used to create setting, by which I mean I will use the internet as it was meant and mock political topics mercilessly on a page few are ever likely to view. Before then, as promised up top, I will read all of your recent chapters and let you know what I thought. <3
A Return

Chapter Summary

Marie and Arthur have a terrible first (and last) date, Percy calls it quits in more ways than one and Effie and John rekindle their romance.

Chapter Notes

I have not updated since I had a World Cup to complain about. To round out that arc of the introductions, France won, in case you missed it. I feel that I have more to say, however, and in that spirit I am using my footnotes (of which I would otherwise have none this go around) to tease a narrative that I have alluded to in several fics by this point. The story is lewd and laddish even by my standards, full of naughties football nostalgia, and as the primary focus is a historical figure who didn't get a TURN on the show, will likely never show up in the feed. Let me know if you want it in your inbox though, I am having some fun in the southern theatre. ;)

Anyway, I am surprised and humbled by how many hits this story has received since last we met. Thank you so, so much, I really never anticipated having so much interest and support. I wish so terribly that I could reward your wait with something worthy, but oh my gosh … you are going to flat out hate this chapter as much as the summary might suggest.

That is your warning. Have fun. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was not so bad, Marie considered as darkness overtook the twilight. The evening air was cool, damp, and infused with city scents the moisture served to strengthen – it was not pleasant by any stretch, but Arthur's company was proving to be just that for the first time since it had occurred to her that she might fancy him, if only just a little. He had lent her his well-worn pullover when he saw her shiver and Marie smiled at her secret thought that the proprietor of the kiosk from which they had purchased a few provisions (a car charger for their phones and a road map should wherever they found themselves be out of range for both Google and the in-built GPS) must have assumed that they were dating.

Arthur was quiet even when judged by his own standards and kept a few paces behind her as they made their way back to the borrowed car, attempting to calculate how far the could get before their absence would give them away. The plan was to drive to Calais overnight, find a crowded grocery carpark to sleep in for a few hours, and, (presuming that by the following afternoon the Ferrari had been reported stolen and they themselves missing) and then take back and side roads all the way to Turin where her aunt and uncle had a residence and Ethan received his post. It had been Marie’s idea, and now Arthur had made it his to work out the exact logistics.

They were not stealing if they planned to return the car to its rightful owner and they were not
running away if they planned to come back.

Marie wondered if she would even be missed having already made up her mind that there was no point being in Liverpool to have a conversation when no one cared what she had to say.

As the street lights flickered on, she stopped in her tracks. For a moment, she felt as though she had been caught by more than just the same reflection that always found her in this city at around this hour.

“What is it?” Arthur asked when he caught up seconds later.

“I just think it is romantic, that’s all,” Marie mused. “When my dad married Ellie Hewlett, the city changed all of the street lights to blue to celebrate her Scottish heritage and they still haven’t changed it back.”

“I imagine the pair of them would be good at getting such measures through local government,” Arthur shrugged.

“They have it a lot in Scotland, too. Have you -”

“No, I just mean, it is a precaution. Part of Lady Eleanor’s lobbying. The blue light makes it harder to find veins and therefore acts as a deterrent to drug use. That is why they have them in the lavatories at petrol stations and in a number of retailers and chain restaurants. Romance has nothing to do with it.”

“Oh,” Marie said, feeling especially naïve. The borrowed sweater began itching against her skin and what limited warmth it provided retreated with Arthur’s blunt statement. She pulled up the sleeve and began to examine her bare arm against his assessment, realising that her sometimes-friend was probably right, reinforcing a deeply seeded suspicion that everything she thought and most of what she did was terribly wrong.

When she looked up at him, he afforded her a smile. As she saw things, the time to turn back had long since passed.

Percy Nantaba did not know if he was enough, nor was he certain that giving Effie Gwillim’s established patterns, he even wanted to be.

She had called him several times since abandoning him to his family and hers in pursuit of the brother constantly present between them. Her face on his display screen grew considerably less pretty with each attempt he was determined to ignore, illuminating but failing to glow as it once had.

Percy did not know what Effie thought she had to say to him, but he was all too aware of what it was he might say to her when next they spoke. He did not want to have this conversation, not yet. Nor did he want to speak to his adoptive father who sat across from him at the kitchen table of their family home, saying as much as he man entered the room. His father gave him no reply, instead putting a kettle on, putting bags of tea in mugs along with requested amounts of milk, sugar and honey, waiting in silence for the whistle. It occurred to Percy that the Graves’ would take umbrage with the working-class presentation of the beverage, coming from the milieu where tea was as much of a ceremony as it could be considered a drink. Percy kept his head down, reasoning that Margaret would certainly waste little time in making her distaste known, that he had no further reason to
involve himself in such matters. He was already half-resolved to turn in his letter of resignation after the holiday had passed. He would stay on until a suitable replacement could be sorted – a few weeks at most. Reasoning that there was little chance he would see much of Effie in the interim giving the story her paper had published that same morning about the MP and the nephew the Mail had failed to identify as such, everything that was or might well have been was so good as lost. He and Effie would not have a proper goodbye. He did not owe one to her aunt and was reasonably sure the tea served without a dainty saucer were serve this place. His father left and returned several times, eventually sitting himself across from Percy with an offer of the remainder of an open package of biscuits in which he had no particular interest. His phone rang again, and again, he elected to ignore the call.

“Why should I answer?” he countered his father’s grunt of disapproval. “Effie has been ignoring me since we arrived to find John in your living room.”

“The lad has had a hard life,” his father replied, reflecting, “it came up last night in conversation between your uncle, Admiral Graves and Colonel Tarleton-”

Percy did not care for the old man to continue.

“Yeah, that is just it, isn’t it?” he shook his head. “The instant she got here, Effie called her aunt and uncle because … I don’t know, I guess she met you guys and thought us not to be a right proper family just like the kids at school did -”

His father shook his head. “Percy that is not a fair comparison.”

He had been ten when the mother of a friend had driven him home from sport and upon meeting his mother at the door had asked if the lady of the house was home. It was the first time Percy had ever heard the word ‘adopted’ and the first time it ever occurred to him that he belonged somewhere else. Having since travelled far and wide, having met the last living member of his birth-family, Percy had concluded it was these elements that had no place here in this house. He remembered his mother’s muted offence, such was her shock at being taken for a maid as the woman’s language and posture implied, he remembered the way the two had then laughed it off and felt the shared discomfort echo over decades into Effie’s increasingly warranted concerns that she was not well-liked.

They were made for one another, she and John.

Percy’s jaw clenched when he considered the wider context of the stories exchanged over dinner. Effie had quit the school play when she had not been given a staring role. John continued to be bitter that Ban was better liked at school and that as such what he assessed as his superior sportsmanship had been overlooked. Effie had admitted to being happy over this development, thinking that he would have more time for her with less responsibility to whatever sport was in season.

They would have all the time in the world for each other now, which was for the best. It seemed neither of them had much interest in getting on with anyone else.

“It is,” Percy answered his father. “Because she cannot stand to be among people she considers beneath her. She did not ask Dr Tarleton and her Lord husband to dinner, she begged them to come serve as instruction in communication – Ellie working in charity and Ban on constant campaign for whatever measure he is trying to bring to the floor. And do you know what the disgusting thing is? They -all of them, Ellie, Ban, Marie, even the Graves’- were far, far more willing and gracious guests than either John or Effie, you know – the people we actually invited to our table,” he spat. “Maybe things would have gone better if John hadn’t been here, but now I am convinced that he would have come, or at least come up regardless. I think her sole interest in me was the slight resemblance we share and maybe, just maybe she felt she needed to extend the company to a few more familiar faces
in hopes of increasing it now that she has seen where I come from. It is dumb but … I have to think if I was employed by anyone else she would never have looked at me at all.”

His father let this assumption linger for quite some time before posing to him, “would you … have worked outside of your chosen profession for anyone else?”

Percy failed to answer.

“Your mother and I always understood your having gone to work as the then-Miss-Hewlett’ bodyguard as an effort to position yourself to meet your biological brother.”

“I went to work for Lady Eleanor because I could not afford grad school at the time and with a bachelors in archaeology all one is really qualified to do is bag groceries or wait tables whilst hoping one of the digs you’ve applied gets itself a grant to allow for a few months of summer work on a site,” Percy defended. “Then the process begins again and in between clearing tables and reciting the days specials you are worried over the latest news from Frankfurt, Athens or Ankara – is a financial or constitutional crisis going to cancel a project in its second year after ten plus have been spent in preparation from the academic side?”

His father nodded his understanding but spoke as though he had not heard a word. “I would go as far as to say that all of your academic and intellectual interests are rooted in your want to find your birth family. Your problem, Percy, is that you prefer lofty questions to practical ones. You did not want to know who your biological parents were, you wanted to verify the narrative you over-invested in: same as you don’t want to know John, you want to go back to wanting an older brother – which I think is why you are so happy to cast him in the light you do now, creating a rivalry where their really should not be one.”

“What do you mean?” Percy asked, earnestly interested in his father’s analysis.

“You see him as a rival, looking for a life that he experienced first, looking for evidence that you will ever remain a few years behind him. You invite that relationship, because you see it as being the only one on offer to you.”

“That is not why I fell in love with Effie,” Percy sighed.

“Do you think she is aware of that?”

It never would have worked out between them, Effie laughed to herself when John returned to the hotel hours later with a bag reading ‘H+M’, doubting its contents would be much of an improvement over the dancewear she had borrowed from a teenager’s weekend rucksack. “Does Mary pick out your clothes for work?” she wondered as she lifted the seventies-inspired moss green dress from the ten-pence plastic, trying not to laugh at all the ways in which it missed its mark.

“I thought it matched your eyes,” he said simply, deaf to her light criticism.

“Do you think about my eyes that often?” Effie smirked. “Clearly, you don’t think much about my hair. Would it have killed you to have stopped at Bvlgari?”

“For your hair?” John squinted.
“Their shampoo uses white tea extracts,” she began to explain.

“There is shampoo at the hotel,” he shrugged. “Anyway, I didn’t want to give you any unrealisable ideas about some sibling relationship we two might then share, now that I know this is the criteria by which you and Ban measure such things. That said . . . I was in the area and I did manage to pick up this,” he smiled mischievously before proudly producing the hand he had thus far hidden behind his back.

By his posture and tone, Effie was anticipating jewellery of special significance.

Instead she found herself faced with a paper crown and a bag of Burger King. She hit him in feigned fury. In truth she was quite content with the present. She had tried to call Percy several times since he had left her in the hotel. By the fifth voicemail message that played after a single ring, it had occurred to her that she really was better off taking a nap or a shower—both of which she had attended to, albeit in the opposite order. She had awakened shortly before he had arrived with a slight headache and a strong desire for saturated fat. “Ow,” John said as she pinched at his sides. He had grown a bit heavier in recent years, the effect of domestication and the small rebellions he engaged in against the process, drinks with the lads and pub-fare prior to supper. It suited him, somehow. He seemed happy despite the doubts he still carried around it being deserved. He gave her a curious look and tried to do the same, but Effie was too quick for his otherwise occupied hands. She laughed and then her face fell, realising the comparative comfort she felt with this man whom she had loved when she was herself still young and tart, before a failed pregnancy had left her with stretch marks and a small pouch of a belly that fad diets did nothing to fix. She had no great care for her messy, greying hair or the smile lines that were beginning to stay, for the mascara that had stained her face earlier or for the calories she had no desire to count, and neither did John. Effie worried that she would never have this with anyone else.

She worried he would not either.

“Hey . . . what is the matter?” John asked, taking one of the burgers from the bag, handing it to Effie after she adjusted her crown he had placed on her head before taking the other for himself.

“I just thought . . .”

“What?”

“We were talking about luxury jewellers and you come back with this.”

“Oh, right, right, that reminds me there was something else.” He reached into his coat pocket and presented her with a ring. “What do you think? Rather, what do you think Mary will think? I know you two are not practically well-acquainted with one another, but seeing as you certainly have an opinion of the dress I picked out for you, I fret that I may also have over-esteemed my own taste in this selection.” In the course of this small-speech, John had grown remarkably serious despite the recreation of words he had likely had scripted for the past few minutes if not more.

Effie, finding she could not articulate these thoughts of which he inquired, simply squealed with delight.

John began to blush. “I think you are more excited about this than you were when I proposed to you.”

It was true. The observation caught her completely off-guard. Effie sat down on the side of the hotel bed. “When you asked me,” she considered slowly, “it sort of felt as though you had not noticed how I had changed in university. Like the ring you picked out had been made for a much smaller
hand.”

“I bought that under the observation of three of the girls you lived with at the time and Charlotte Wessex who invites herself to everything.”

“No, it wasn’t the ring exactly, it was the proposal, I just felt like I wasn’t that girl anymore. That I was bound to let you down. I’m glad now we never let it get that far.”

“Effie, I never meant to hurt you -” John began to apologise, taking a seat beside her.

“You didn’t.” This was a lie but Effie did not want to dwell. “How are you going to ask Mary?”

“Not sure that I am now.”

“Yes, you are,” Effie dismissed him, “you’ve been sure, the fact that you came here to connect with your family, with Percy ..”

“And screwed everything up.”

“But you tried and keep trying, you’ll get it, here, lets practice.”

“What practice?”

“The proposal!” Effie exclaimed with too much excitement. “Pretend I am the future Mrs. John Graves Simcoe.” He had, after all, done so once before.

Margret Graves sipped a whiskey sour out of a small stirring straw, forgetting to seem dainty, finding that the hotel bar might have been a bit more heavy handed in measuring out the shot. She needed a harder drink.

Samuel, likely sensing as much, was taking his dear sweet time in the shower.

She had been waiting alone at the bar waiting to enter the restaurant for the past thirty-five minutes and was beginning to grow impatient. Margaret found she was chewing at the straw’s end, rendering it useless in the function she had appointed, forcing her lips to the rim of the glass as was intended. As was proper. As though anything in Leicester had the right to dictate to her what constituted good manners.

She had returned to the Nantaba residence and suffered though what barely constituted as a ‘cuppa’ as the middle classes called it, perhaps using the weak enunciation to differentiate the beverage from a proper cup of tea, which what she had been served surely was not. Margaret said little to this effect, saving her energies for where practice had told her they would best serve, the passive-aggressive comparison between herself and the other women present by extension of the children they had raised.

This, the hour that followed had shown, had been a non-contest. Percy had abandoned them all upon entry to sulk in the kitchen. Effie and John were back at the hotel, consoling one another over this fact.

Margaret had suspected from that start that the situation between her cherished niece and the boy born in a bathroom and raised in a sewer would not end on the best terms, but she had never
expected anyone in her niece’s chosen company could be so low as to break things off via a text message. She said as much to Zeinab when she had accompanied her into the room Effie shared with her son the night before, unwilling to let that woman touch anything belonging to the poor, sweet girl she would throw out on the street simply because she had been a shoulder for her god-brother to cry on when he had been brought to a ballet studio, made to relive memories Margaret herself struggled to even consider.

John’s suitcase, gratefully, had never been unpacked. Woe, Margaret said on her way out the door, that either had come at all.

She had knocked on the door when she arrived back at the hotel but had received no answer. Curious, she unlocked the door to her own room, took a cup from the bathroom sink and pressed it to the shared wall over the headboard of the hotel bed, positioning the pillows to make herself comfortable. Listening to what sounded to be a declaration of love on the parts of both children, she announced she needed a drink before dinner. Samuel, who had turned the water on to full blast after verbally discouraging her invasion of privacy, was showering with the bathroom door open, singing to himself, doubtlessly in the hopes of muting the sounds from the other side of the wall with his own. Margaret wondered if he had heard her over his own commotion, half-wishing he had been more successful in his pleas for her to take pause.

She glanced again to the doors connecting the restaurant to the lobby, thinking momentarily that John had emerged. When she realised she had been mistaken, Margaret finished what remained on her cocktail in a single gulp, crashed the emptied tumbler back onto its coaster and rose from her barstool to halt the advance.

“I thought we had seen the last of you,” she greeted, routing Percy Nantaba’s march on the reception desk.

“I … to be perfectly frank, an hour ago I was of the same mind,” Percy replied, stunted from a lack of breath.

“What changed?”

“Nothing … nothing changed. Mrs Graves, I love your niece – nothing could change that.”

Margaret had spent the whole of her adult like in journalism and publishing. She had enough working relationships with men of power and means to see the difference between a lie being spoken and simple ignorance being set on display. Percy, she decided, belonged to the latter. It seemed to her that the best way to disabuse him of his illusions was to lead him to that which he thought he desired.

“Do you truly mean that?” she asked, clutching her palm to her heart as though to indicate she was especially moved by his sentiment. She dropped it immediately, thinking the gesture a touch too far, but if Percy noticed, he gave no indication.

“I do.”

When they reached the door, Margaret was the one to knock. “Elizabeth,” she called out, “It is only me, please open up. I need -”

The door swung open to reveal her niece in nothing more than a white terrycloth bathrobe with the hotel’s insignia embroidered on the left breast. Her hair was a mess of unmanaged curls undone in a way that made Margaret do a double-take, for the woman she raised was not one for store-brand shampoo. When John joined her, opening the door further to stand at her side, any doubts Margaret had about the nature of this rendezvous decimated, for she glimpsed what looked to be a woman’s
dress lying crumpled on the floor by the bed. Percy’s eyes, however, were fixated on Effie’s hand.

“Percy, it is not what you think,” she said, taking a step toward him.

He took a step back. “I’m guessing it is close enough.”

Accent aside, there were certain words he hated hearing from her lips. ‘Well’ was chief among them. ‘Well’ was a contranym when she spoke it.

The word was a reprimand and a warning; Ellie was certain to go on at length.

‘Well’ was an order to find a comfortable position.

Percy, previously pacing the foyer of his employer’s home resigned himself to one of the drawing rooms but did not take a seat. He had just returned from a long drive from which his legs and back still felt from the limited movement.

He had woken up alone that morning in his old bed in his parent’s house to find that The Daily Mirror had published an article along the same assumptions Effie and John had attempted to dissuade him from making. He believed the pair of them, but then, the problem was never one of the ‘rekindled romance’ as was written in boldface on the front page – it was that his ex was comfortable in this chaos.

It was that he was not.

“Well,” Ellie scolded in accordance with her art. “That is simply what happens when you are in a relationship with a public figure. Frankly any reaction is an overreaction. Driving back to London is only to add fire to flame.” The fact that Ellie rang him upon was in itself an argument for the opposition. Effie had likely called her to cry or complain, in hoping for the former princess’ intervention, she was again hiding herself again behind celebrity, albeit not her own. He refused to let it intimidate him on principle, despite the fact that Dr Tarleton signed his cheques.

“I take it you haven’t seen The Sun then?” Percy countered meanly.

“Oh, I have and the matter has long since been sorted internally,” Ellie offered with disinterest. The cover article stated that the underaged ward of the newly promoted Brexit Minister was arrested the night prior in Banastre Tarleton’s home district, destroying city property and crashing a stolen Ferrari at high speed. It had taken the fire brigade hours to retrieve Marie and the driver of the vehicle, a classmate who had identified himself online as Arthur Wellesley (of the Dublin Wellesleys) from the wreckage. The pair were then reported to have been discovered in the middle of a sexual act, resulting in minor injuries for both parties. They were realised on bail the same evening and Sir Banastre was reported to have covered the cost of damages. “Since we are on the subject, are you going to ask me if she is alright?” Ellie asked. “Or has a few days at home made you so woefully narcissistic and petty that you seek to use my step-daughter’s traumatic experience to absolve you of your own faults in personal conduct? Complain about Effie or her competitors, that is fine. Marie, however, is fifteen which should alone eliminate her from being your baseline comparison,” she said sharply. Percy felt his heart stop. He had known his boss to order executions with less ire than that which he heard through the line.

“Of course, of course you are right – I had not intended, and I’m sorry. I – I should have been the
one to call,” he stammered.

“You can talk to her if you want, it might do her some good,” she gave.

“S-she is not -” suddenly Percy imagined the situation being far worse that he originally assessed, seeing Marie in a hospital bed, covered by tubes and contusions, barely conscious, or perhaps not at all; Ban and Mary standing vigil at their daughter’s side, talking to her constantly as the doctors had instructed, looking hopelessly for any signs that some part of the girl might have survived the near-fatal crash.

- And here he was, taking this tragedy as an opportunity to attack when all Ellie had done was call to see if he was alright despite everything else that had presumably gone so terribly wrong.

Taking one final stretch, he walked back to the foyer to find his keys.

Finally, Ellie answered the question he failed to finish. “Good God, no! She and Arthur Wellesley were waiting at a light in a residential area with the car in neutral when Marie leaned over to kiss him. This shifted the gear and they rolled at no more than three miles an hour into an empty wheelie bin, knocking it over and cracking the lid before regaining control of the car. The owner of the house called the police who arrived within minutes of receiving the exaggerated report, thankfully with medical back up because the kids had their braces caught in one another’s and could not free themselves – plyers and wire cutters had to be used.

“They then spent about an hour in a holding cell while I filled out the corresponding paperwork and Thomas and Jason -long story - found an area orthodontist with holiday hours who could replace both children’s wiring. Ban and Mary had a talk and came to a happy compromise, then she and Thomas went to a hotel and the children came back with us.

“Mrs Wellesley’s flight lands at ten – Mary is going to pick her up and then bring her here where we can discuss consequences. Ban has the two in the kitchen now making breakfast under his supervision which, mind, would be hell in and of itself, but he also has some twelve tabs open his tablet and keeps asking them A-Level test prep questions while they work. Marie and Arthur are too embarrassed to look at one another. I’m sure she would be happy for your chivalrous rescue.”

“I think it would just embarrass her that I asked.”

“That too,” Ellie seemed to smile. “But to the reason for my call, as you see, Percy, nothing is ever as bad as it looks in bold-print,” she said. “You think you would have learned that much by now.”

“About me and Effie, or John and Effie, I don’t care I just -”

“There is a difference between not caring and not caring. That is why Ban and I never make a fuss over gets printed unless it involves our children. But you? You left her alone and crying and went back to London, echoing everything The Mirror had to say. I didn’t get a chance to listen to the voice message she left me until this morning -”

“Our children, Ellie?” Percy lingered, finding himself smiling. Ellie had been strategically distancing herself from Ban’s daughters for months, afraid to overstep a line that would be impossible to be defined were it never disregarded. Marie, especially, seemed upset by the increasing space between them, one among the many reasons she found for acting out in the simple want for attention from the adults in her life.

“I called to offer you advice not argue semantics,” Ellie dismissed. He could hear laughter in the background, laughter he could reasonably infer she for once might be willing to join.
“I think it is great -”

“It is … it is complicated as families always are.”

“Right.”

“My usual tactic is to never confirm or deny anything. It is way too late for that, so Ban is planning on annotating the entire article with reports and receipts via Twitter after we’ve sorted things with the other adults responsible, essentially mocking the paper for its marked preference to exaggerate rather than fact check. The children will issue an apology and work off the damages. And then … I’ll get my sister to endow Arthur with a letter of reference and recommendation upon his finishing school to a command as far away from Marie as allowed by geopolitics. It is an unfortunate time that this happened to them and I really would not want either of their futures adversely affect by his Facebook post that prompted this whole circus, but the two need to show themselves worthy of responsibility – and,” she shifted. “And quite frankly so do you. If not for Effie than for yourself, man. Have a bit of respect.”

She was right; but then that was easier for her to say.

“What would you do though if you had no power?”

“Oh everyone has power, Percy. Do you mean what would I do if I were you now? Well, I’m glad you ask -”

Well.

He hated that word and the way his boss said it.

Chapter End Notes

Story time:

This is a eulogy. It just happens to begin in a five-star hotel with a stolen ceremonial goat, a sex doll bearing a suspicious resemblance to a cabinet minister, and a teenager who awoke at slightly after ten in the morning to the taste of his own sick.

...
he could neither remember blowing up or using to her intended purpose. This too-long title, of course, was not what had been written on the box, but the boy who had bought it had called her Ursula where ‘Sexy Chantal’ was instead printed, and, finding it more fitting, over the course of the past few days George had begun to endow her with the full power of her position, which, as he understood it, was likely something to do with the appropriation of funds.

Even having no idea what he had done, he felt filthy in ways that failed prior experience. A girl he could take to breakfast, the doll he could but return to her box with the hope that he would no longer think of her as a conservative politician he never otherwise thought about. It was the face, the way the sewn-on wig was fashioned to frame it, the fact that she had been introduced to him as “Found this in St, Pauli, doesn’t she bare a frightening resemblance to Ursula von der Leyen?” to which George had responded “Who?” and was afforded with a title both general and exactingly specific in response. It was at this point that it might have first occurred to him to leave the lads to their own devices, but instead he returned the laughter and ordered another round. […]

He had been living in Germany for the better part of the past year on a student exchange with a host family, a two hour-train ride and about as far removed as imaginable from the luxury of the room he now occupied.

Luxury, that was, but for the goat in the corner, devouring the box he had been looking for.

“Hennes!” George yelled. The animal acknowledged him but was not startled by his cry, something perhaps born the creature’s frequent exposure to the sound and screams of a stadium packed with his fans.

The goat, the hotel, and the Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth were all won in the same sustained advance though the objective, clearly, had been lost.

… Should I explain?
The goat?
...Myself?
Perhaps.

Instead let me just give you my favourite short exchange (been a while since we've done puns!):
„Aber das ist alles nicht so Schlimm-coe,“ Ban said.
“Remarkable that your mastery of the German language only extends to such point as it
allows you to be as obnoxious as you otherwise are in English.”
“I do what I can. Oh! I’ve another – to circle back, you are the real kidnappers, you realise,” he grinned. John failed to meet it. Hennes belted his discontent and the baby began to cry.

And tell you what is coming -

Up next: The Schleswig-Holstein Question is finally answered. (Yes! You are actually going to learn some history! I know, right? Not here of all places ...)

As always, thank you so much for reading!
A Feast

Chapter Summary

Arthur overhears parts of a private conversation; Marie tries desperately to distract her friend from the chaos of her home life. Ban makes direct accusations, Ellie responds with thinly veiled threats. Mary R. attends breakfast with her ex’s family, hoping for a mêlée.

Chapter Notes

This is a re-post … kind of.
More of a re-do.
And a half-job at that -

I deleted my original attempt at the eleventh chapter after either misinterpreting a comment or (more likely) miswriting the cursed thing to begin with, so … like everyone else to ever overcompensate a complete absence of confidence in their abilities with adjustments that feel like apologies (but we will call “effort” as such is the agreed upon language for an over-correction of one’s errors) I super-diligently identified my own problems with the chapter, found a focal point for the disaster of a breakfast scene and fixed it accordingly. I added to the Ban and Ellie scenes, added entire John and Effie perspectives that I had originally intended to appear sometime later but … (almost predictably) this all brought me to well over forty pages – Yikes! I could not completely fuck the same bloody chapter up on two separate attempts …

So, while you are in fact getting something new (and a lot of new to compare word counts) you are not getting all of it today.

Tomorrow.

Promised.

A lot of worthwhile writers updated this weekend and I need to go comment in a somewhat timely fashion to justify my even having an account to myself (whatever works!), eating into how much I can possibly edit before evening sets in and the responsibilities of real life begin anew. Today – a re-do of a scene no one much responded to in the original; tomorrow – those John and Effie POVs and slightly more explicit sex. Oh la la!

As to an “actual” update, I’m going to do my best to give you something before Valentine’s Day, or, at least before the oh-so-romantic Liverpool v Bayern CL fixture, which is where I will be celebrating the commercial concept of love a few days after the rest of the world. <3 You can find me wearing red … ;) Afterwards, hand over heart I am going to do my best to finish the last few chapters and get them out in a more timely fashion than I’ve taken with tending to this particular wound to my pride. You’ll like the ending … probably. ;) XOXO.

Until then, take care, and as always, I hope you enjoy.
Arthur Wellesley stood in a conventional kitchen with a gas stove, two ovens, seven A Level study guides covering various subjects and what he estimated to be around thirty-five different sorts of freshly baked breakfast pastries covering everything else. With the clicking sound of a timer, bacon, eggs and sausages cracking and sizzling in separate pans and the nervous, incessant babbling of his schoolmate, he could nearly ignore the fight happening in the room upstairs between the two adults who had posted his bail the night before, brought him to an orthodontist with emergency holiday hours, and, in so doing, caused him to re-evaluate what the worst possible outcome of acting out might be.

The morning after, it was as difficult to look at Marie as it had been in the cell that they two had briefly shared while paperwork was sorted and everyone at the station had a proper laugh over the predicament in which they had been found. He had cut his lip slightly on either her braces of his own when they had tried to free themselves from a kiss more painful than passionate. Holding a no-longer frozen ice pack to his wound the next morning, he wondered if the MP at whose mercy he had most unexpectedly found himself would have been quite as jovial about the whole affair had Marie suffered a similar cut. Maybe, he considered (when he had been woken up at five and in the few hours since), he had misread his standing entirely – Sir Banastre (as he suddenly insisted upon referring to himself and being referred - or deferred - to as) was not amused in the slightest and was only smiling as a means of provocation, a way of saying that (in contrast to Arthur’s own) his teeth were straight, that a correctional device had never caused him to crash a Ferrari in the most unremarkable manner, that he had been in a similar situation at the same age, he would have most certainly gotten further than five blocks and first base -

though, had the last of those imagined taunts entered the MPs mind, it was possible that Tarleton truly was content with the way things worked out between Arthur and his almost-daughter.

The two had been sent to bed the night before with barely more than a warning. Arthur had spent what felt a long while afterwards lying awake on the sofa he had been presented as a bed, with a hand-knitted blanket that he could not imagine any of the low-born but high-rolling Tarleton sisters to have made, much less so any of the career-women ‘Sir Banastre’ and his brothers had courted, married, or simply brought ‘round for a weekend of regret. It vaguely stank of cold, wet and salty air, of animal hair and sweet parfum – things foreign and familiar, reminding him of a scarf Kitty had made him last winter which he no longer wore without really having a reason, reminding him that she had yet to reply to his texts, that it had been hours since he had even looked. He reached his phone out of his pocket, and, seeing that she had since written, did not bother to read what, having not much to say for himself. He was tired and a little too comfortable to sleep, and so he shifted, studying the outlines of objects, guessing at what they were, wondering at what ‘Sir Banastre’ would say when he inevitably came back downstairs, stone faced and seething over the situation – what exaggerated war narrative he could expect to hear with the implication that there were places on this earth where no one could hear him scream.

The longer Arthur waited, the harder the task given by the hour fell to him. The clock struck twelve before sleep finally found him unaware, and when he was woken a scare five hours later, he felt worse for the rest he had taken. Tarleton met him with a smile, a task, and a question from a practice test that took him completely off guard, so removed was it from expectations that Arthur felt as though he had been robbed entirely of the witty responses he had readied in wait.

“I mean, you can see traces of that mentality in sport today,” Marie continued to babble as she kneaded some new dough though her ‘dad’ had long since left them to their own devices, his Lady
wife having received a call from her American sister-in-law that served to upset. Tarleton’s promise to return shortly had already taken the tone of half an hour and Arthur felt a kind of schadenfreude as he listened to the creak of the upstairs floorboards, knowing the smaller man to be pacing the guestroom with disease. He bit his lips to fight the inclination to smile, half-suspecting that his school-friend’s increasingly nonsensical answer to the Schleswig-Holstein Question went on as it did to afford the couple a measure of privacy the old country estate did not on the merits of architecture.

“We don’t have friendship clubs in England and they don’t in Denmark either – that is a thing belonging to Germany and Italy, you know – places that used to be states of the Holy Roman Empire,” Marie continued, her tone precise as though she were speaking from a pulpit. “Like on the final day of the 1981/82 season, Napoli was playing Genoa to the tune of 2-1, needing only a point to qualify for the UEFA cup, where Genoa needed a point to stay in Serie A with AC Milan winning at Cesena. So, Napoli fans started to cheer for Genoa to equalize, the Partenopei threw the game, Genoa stayed up, Milan went down and the fans have enjoyed a famous friendship since. Something similar happened in 2006/2007 also on the last day when a point would secure promotion for both sides and they colluded to play the nulliest of draws that they could both return to the top flight.”

“Something similar happened with QPR and City in 2011/2012 -” Arthur began to offer in response.

“Yea,” Marie interrupted, “but their hooligan firms don’t now meet up for a nice lunch before any match between the two sides.”

“That is legitimately the most Italian thing I have ever heard of in my life,” Arthur snorted. Marie quite nearly shared his laughter but was stopped by a slammed door, window, or some other unseen wooden frame.

“It is the remnants of a loose confederacy on local consciousness. In Germany they have that too, the Schalke and Nürnberg faithful drink together before during and after a meeting between their two teams, and that one just stems from a few fans in the eighties having been drunk on the same train and having taken a shine to each other. Yea … it was like that with the kingdoms of Schleswig and Holstein,” she returned to the famous friendship in question, “they wouldn’t accept not playing in the same league, as it were – that is basically what the Treaty of Ribe from 1490 states - "Forever Inseparable", so I mean even though the treaty itself was of very little consideration during the formal conflict, it is understandable that the people latched onto it, both in the arguments of independence and German Unification. It is an expression of the same mentality,” Marie argued as one of the timers went off, lifting a tea towel that covered a bowl of risen dough which she began to separate into balls the size of half a fist, measuring out holes in the centre. “Anyway, back to the mid-nineteenth century,” she hastened. “The Danes looked at the same medieval treaty and took from it that Schleswig was a historically Danish fief and Holstein – like, the very voices they wanted to keep out of their new-ish constitutional parliament - was a problem of the by-then-dissolved Holy Roman Empire. Napoleon III was of the same mind, but most of the other European powers would not accept a weakening of Denmark in favour of a strong Prussia or any other German power gaining control of Keil and thus entrance into the Baltic -”

“So, it is just a matter of government using geography as a contest of realpolitik without paying any mind to the will of the people to whom they made a show of affording a voice?” Arthur attempted. It was, after all, he who had to sit the exam in a few weeks, not her. Marie had, for her part, behaved all morning as though it was normal, even expected, for her to be given difficult test questions while being asked to complete a mundane but no-less impossible task (here, making breakfast for thirty people, many of whom were on strict diets of varying sorts – ‘practice’, her dad had laughingly put it, for the community service that would take up the rest of her holiday break and the GCSEs she would sit thereafter.)
Arthur wondered if Marie was truly benefiting from this method of study. She had good grades and would get into a top university regardless if she did or did not giving who her relatives were, but he could not quite trust that the Liverpudlian proved the best tutor. Tarleton was the odd sort who had just enough knowledge that he often seemed dumber for that which he had acquired. Arthur could not help but wonder if the man’s own admissions essay (for a degree he in the end had not the patience to obtain) was around some sport analogy which one would have to be under the influence of a few pints to admit was plausible – the Thirty Years War and the relegation playoff, cricket and the end of colonialism, Roman warfare and union rugby, or, more probably, the British during the Siege of Yorktown and Liverpool FC’s record in all competition since 1990.

Marie rolled her eyes as though she were privy to his private thoughts. He awaited her response, expecting an explanation as to why one only had to look a hundred years back in the region’s complicated history to anticipate that Kiel would have such a strong handballing side.

“Yeah … but the way our textbook phrases it is ‘practical problems of the implementation of nationalism’,” Marie sighed, “so I mean I guess you would be better off analysing it to post-colonial conflicts in Africa or the Middle East instead of fan base friendships if you need to write five-thousand words but the question can be fully answered in half as many.”

Oh.

“I think if your dad still gives a damn about Schleswig-Holstein when he comes back down, he’d appreciate your take,” Arthur tried to encourage.

Marie smiled at the designation he had afforded the man and nervously resumed chattering about Salic Law and the childless Fredrick VII when the voice of the ‘right honourable’ Ban Tarleton again penetrated the walls and floorboards.

“Is it always like this?” Arthur asked, again reminded of every reason he had found to hate the man since first making his acquaintance, having half-forgotten his long-held sentiment in the chaos of the night prior and the impromptu test prompts the morning brought. Marie did not answer in words, instead using her small finger to destroy the rolls she had made by driving a hole through their centre. “Bagels!” she clarified. “Can you take this and fill it with water, lukewarm?” she asked of the now emptied bowl. “We need to stick these inside for exactly a minute, which will help the cook evenly and will let us add a topping without having to use egg as an adhesive.”

“Do you do this often?”

“Every day, but not usually vegan and almost never to this scale. Um … my dad had to learn to cook with one hand and when I was small, he had me help, probably just to keep me from colouring on the walls or something when he wasn’t looking. Then when my mum got sick and started chemo, it affected her sense of taste so I started expanding my recipes and repertoire to include things she might better enjoy eating,” Marie said, awkward as pain and coping often were to discuss. Arthur knitted his brows, still curious that one of the resident ‘mean-girls’ at his college had such a domestic side to her, that anyone who differentiated herself from the uniformed crowd with flash accessories – designer goods that would not enter retail for months, who routinely left lecture to powder her nose, showed up late ‘with Starbucks’ and left school in a limousine with a security detail after proving an absolute torment to anyone who crossed her the wrong way the day through was expected to help out around the house at all. Most of her classmates thought she was blowing them off when she offered excuses like ‘I can’t, I have to clean my room’ or ‘I need to get back to take the dogs out – the one is just a puppy and the other is old, neither can hold it that long’ naturally anticipating that she had an army of maids to do these things for her. Marie had told him once that the Hewletts were intensely private people, that she only ever saw a select few of her step-mother’s associates at any of
their properties and that even those whom she suspected Lady Eleanor confided in never betrayed anything of what she said to her or her dad, that is, if she said anything at all.

Marie seemed undecided as to whether she found this better than her mother’s percent for putting everything she felt to the pen, to find every fight her parents had later echoed in a poem, song or social media rant. Probably, she sought a middle ground. Cooking, baking, sometimes cleaning, chattering over the sounds she could not escape. Arthur had no such outlet and had no real need for one, he did not have enough memories of his father to miss him, nor, it seemed, did his mother or elder brothers and so he never felt the need to ask. The future was as fully uninteresting as anything that had since elapsed his active mind and as such he was bound to the present where nothing of consequence ever seemed to occur. In a few hours, his mum would come to scold him, promising a punishment that would never take place but which would give him a feasible excuse for not texting his girlfriend in the days to come, when she would no doubt be sour over his attempts to run off with another girl for the weekend – a girl Kitty only knew from the internet, from behind the benefit of a filter. After a period of radio silence, Kitty would doubtlessly think the rumour as falsified as Marie’s beauty and she would forgive the digression as she had in times past by convincing herself that he was not forthcoming with an apology as he had nothing to be sorry about – which, was true, in a sense. Arthur was not altogether object to finding a way into Marie’s knickers, but he had no real romantic intentions towards her. Marie was both too guarded and too often ‘en garde’ for any of that. Half of the attraction was how like she could prove to the man who had raised her and how much any external reminder of that fact seemed to piss ‘Sir Banastre’ right off.

Arthur did as he had been instructed with the bagels, placing them back on a baking rack when the minute expired. “What do I need to do with the water?” he asked. Marie had since worked herself into a small fit of anger.

“I try to do the same thing for Ellie, kind of, but she is weary of food she hasn’t prepared herself, and I know it has nothing to do with me,” she said as she slammed the oven door closed with the same force her tone now carried. “But like - I don’t know. I still *try* and so does my dad but every effort we make just – all the nobles are that way, or so I’m told. They are taught from birth not to partake and of course she is as polite and graceful about it as you’d expect she would be, but it is weird. I feel I know her less living with her than I did when I only knew her from the club. I don’t care but … well I mean my dad – you know!” Marie shifted, directing whatever ire would not evaporate in twelve-minutes at two-hundred-twenty-degrees at him. “About last night, friends should just stay friends! We should have never kissed – not at the stop light specifically, just in general, same as my dad and step-mum should have never gotten together in the first place because it never works out, does it?”

In general, as she phrased it, he felt she made for a decent sparing partner in tongues were the weapon of choice. Marie might have called Tarleton ‘Dad’ and her mother’s marriage to a man who had been a stranger until the night prior might well appear on her birth certificate, but as everyone knew (and her long, lean legs otherwise betrayed) she was the bastard child of a once-famous footballer who had since given her little else. Being that as such she was as tall as he was, he did not have to lean over to meet her lips and this had the advantage of requiring little effort.

He did not want to date her, he had had no idea she otherwise thought of him as a friend.

“Your dad told me once that this long-distance thing I have with Kitty, that she couldn’t be anything more than my ideals projected onto a real person, someone I can’t know and therefore can’t hold to any specific expectations. Maybe the same can be said about people who know one another too well?” he suggested, having seen the made-for-TV-movie Lifetime had put out shortly after the former princess had shocked the nation by breaking off her engagement to another Scottish nobleman for a childhood friend who had never quite been a sweetheart. How he would have loved
to turn Tarleton’s unwarranted and fully unwelcomed comments back upon him and his scandal-wrought romantic entanglements. But Marie seemed sad, she had called him a friend which was more than he ever hoped for or expected while at the same time being the highest of insults, in that this admission came with the assessment that they two should have never kissed in the first place. She was probably projecting, at least in part, whatever feelings she had around all of her parental figures on to them, which, Arthur strategized, for the time he would allow, suddenly wanting nothing more than for her to kiss him again, half-expecting that she wanted him to seem more sensitive, half-delighting in an assumption he was making that she thusly must still desire something from him as well, badly as their date had gone. The door to the room above them slammed shut and a single set of feet barged down the stairwell.

Marie fell into a whisper. Arthur leaned in to hear her, among other, more pleasant anticipations. “With them though its … I mean, I’m just assuming, but you know how my sister and I are set to inherit a goodly part of the Hewlett family fortune? Whatever reasoning went into it, I think Ellie only married my dad so fewer questions would be asked, and he only married her for more immediate monetary reasons, or political, philosophical ones. You know they both support Brexit, right?”

It was not what he was expecting, but held his interest all the same. He nodded for her to continue. “Ellie still isn’t allowed to say anything about the matter directly giving who she used to be and who her siblings, I guess, still are, but I mean you can tell, the whole movement comes to the benefit of her self-sufficiency initiative that she dresses up with less imperialistic nomenclature, ‘green’, ‘bio’, ‘locally sourced’, and so on, which my dad can get behind believing in the same underlining principles and liking what the public misinterprets as a willingness to negotiate with the opposition does for his polling numbers, without voters realising that all that is being debated or agree upon is marketing. I know this sounds conspiratorial, but…”

“I don’t disagree.”

“But it is more than just that, with Ellie, I mean. I have this theory though that she is too … end-game maybe for that to be the whole of her equation. As much as people our age are against Brexit in England, it is more extreme in Scotland, and every day negotiations are dragged out the people up there grow more and more disillusioned with Westminster and, by what may be an unfair relation, Buckingham Palace. Making it more likely that when it comes to pass…”

“If it comes to pass -” Arthur interrupted.

“It will. Both sides secretly want it for their own agendas. Anyway, this whole thing just puts the Hewlett family in a greater position to take power, and with everyone looking at Brussels and London no one is noticing what is going on in Edinburgh. I think if they have a referendum, if Scotland votes to succeed as is looking more and more likely, whosoever face the nobles up north then decide to place on their coinage whilst they negotiate their way back into Europe, they will give Ellie her old title back, saying it was never Elizabeth’s to take. I think if given a choice between England and a by-then-ex-colony, or rather, his wife, my dad would take the former. That or to avoid a war they would not win, the crown will negotiate he and Ellie to be seated to Richmond and a number of other English holdings in the interest of curving his power and influence in parliament, which - if he is ambitious at all - he won’t accept, and will then leave her on those grounds.

“Any road, what I mean I guess is that with all these games playing out in the background, there is no real point of the two playing at being a happy family when there are no eyes or cameras watching, and we Brits don’t have that mentality of places and peoples willing to support an opposing side in the memory of shared interest,” Marie tried to explain, perhaps for her own benefit. “Here, alliances
only last until an objective has been achieved and for all of our pomp and ceremony, it is really just a show when there is one to put on. Watch, Ellie won’t break bread with the rest of us, regardless of how it was prepared. My dad has offended her personal boundaries too much for that – too much! He is her husband! – and for Ellie, I mean, boundaries and geopolitical borders are not that much different. It is how she was raised, and how, contradictory to however he wants to lead his own personal life, my dad really hopes I’m not going to become victim to.”

Arthur hugged her without an ulterior design on the action or interest in how it may be read. This should have been a happy occasion for her whole family, but had only brought the surface other divisions within it. Marie’s mother had given her almost-former-step-father permission to formally adopt her. Maybe, he thought, Ban was the sort who needed constant conflict. With Mary sorted, maybe Ellie was the next-closest target. But this idea would be of no comfort to Marie, who had called him a friend, and so instead of sharing it, Arthur simply elected to confront her with logic.

“You’re are up at five, baking and revising for your GCSEs – and this as one of the wealthiest heiresses on the British Isles. If your dad is trying to keep you grounded, I think he’s been mostly successful. I wouldn’t worry too much about Scottish Independence splitting up your kind-of folks, and Richmond … where I can see the calculations behind your game-theory, it doesn’t quite pan out. Say the Crown’s ultimate goal should there be a split is to remove the Hewletts from their English possessions – they would still be better suited seating Edna or Edmund giving the reality that the Duchess of Hamilton has only one child, a daughter at that, and though Lady Anna has given her husband sons, her confession makes their entire line null and void as far as England is concerned and the title would eventually die along with Lord Edmund. Forcing your dad out of Commons might serve in the immediate, but Ellie might yet bear him a son, and, as you point out, in principle, how different are the two houses in terms of -”

“Oh no!” Marie shook her head, still speaking in whispers. “My dad can’t have kids, it is impossible – biologically speaking, that is, he is sterile. I know vasectomies can be reversed, but even then, it would be extremely unlikely that he’d be able to reproduce. It is probably why he … or why Ellie -”

“Well … it is defiantly what the fight is about,” Arthur gave, relieved on a number of grounds he did not have time to fully list, his thought interrupted by the taunts of one of Marie’s cousins (whom he would later learn to his great annoyance was herself called Maria.)

“Ohhh … I’d find somewhere more private if I were you,” the little girl half-sang in a quiet but giddy voice, sounding as though she was about to turn the spelling of the word ‘kissing’ into a nursery rhyme of sorts. Arthur took a step away from his friend and turned to the dark-haired girl of about ten, still in her pyjamas, who, as she stole a croissant from one of the baskets continued, “Yea, Uncle B – is kind of on a war-march. What ever is going on here,” she indicated, shifting her index finger between the two of them in such a way that might well have seemed scolding were she not so small, “I would just keep it on the DL. Do we have any marmalade?”

“Raspberry or Orange?” Marie asked her as though it were on offer.

“Breakfast is at ten,” Arthur informed her curtly, snatching back the half-eaten pastry. Marie responded by handing her another – this one smeared with butter and blood coloured jam and asking sweetly if she and her sisters wanted to help set the table after they had all changed into their riding gear. Arthur looked down at the half moon he had confiscated, tore away the bits that had met little Maria’s lips and tried a bite for himself. “It is okay,” he told Marie when she had at last gotten rid of her little cousin.

“Just okay?” she spat, looking at the crumbs on his hand.

“I mean, your family, you’ll … it will be okay. You’ll go back to everyone pretending to happy and
then you’ll go off to university and you genuinely will be.”

Marie began to laugh. “When I go off the uni, I know one thing for damn sure: I’m going to have a coffee-marker and a mini-fridge filled with packaged-sandwiches and kiosk snacks even though I’ll only buy a newspaper once a week, and absolutely, absolutely no flour in sight anywhere, full stop.”

Arthur smiled. “That is like the set up I’ve now. Only way really. Yet you call me a terrible host, what nerve.”

“You could in theory brother yourself to put snacks on plates for people and yet still convince the crowd that you don’t really give a shit about any of us,” Marie taunted.

“But I do care,” he said and for a moment genuinely meant it. This gave her pause. She pressed her lips together until they grew red, then white, disappearing as she approached this statement with concentrated hesitation. He wondered what he had done wrong.

“I don’t think that love is necessarily ‘more than’ friendship,” Marie told him after a wait that felt an age unto itself. “I don’t know why people phrase it in that way and … okay, I want to have sex like everyone else in my year seems to be, but like … not at the expense of forever feeling weird around you. I’d say ‘sorry’ but … I’m not, not really. Some people were just never meant to ‘take it to the next level’ and we just happen to be two of them. If … you want though,” she squinted, “you can pretend that we were word- for-word doing whatever the tabloids said and I’ll play along. No one would believe me anyway if I tried to deny it. Half the girls in most of the WhatsApp groups of which I’m part are asking me how it was, the others aren’t talking to me at all – I’ll show you. It is them you should chat up because it means they are jealous and you have a better shot.”

“You would sell your friends out like that?” he laughed.

“You are my friend, they … well, it varies, but regardless they’ll be happy to hook up either because they imagine you’re interesting or want to have one over on me, when really, I’ll be laughing over the whole thing … kind of feeling bad for Kitty whenever she agrees to take you back, but beyond that, I don’t feel there is too much moral conflict. We are friends, you and I. Or, I don’t know … maybe I hate you all with equal measure.” Arthur did not know if this was said in jest.

“It is not that bad though, is it?” he said, his eyes lifting to the ceiling in indication of what he meant.

“No, I suppose it isn’t. Anyway, like you point out, I’ll be at some elite school with my mini-fridge and messy flat sooner than later, and I’ll only read once a week about how Dad and Ellie are doing their dance of being mutually parasitic for political and public gain instead of hearing their soundtrack on repeat.”

They had had this fight before and as such he knew he had deal himself defeat before the accusation even left his lips.

“Well, it is not as though this is entirely unprecedented!” he shouted as he slammed the dresser drawer shut after retrieving his waistcoat.

Of all the things presently aggravating Ban Tarleton about his wife, *this*, he decided, was at the top of the list. He never unpacked his suitcase when he travelled, holiday or otherwise.
She *always* did.

He imagined her taking another man into the room they had shared in Davos – the French or Canadian President, perhaps – into a hotel suite with its suitcases unpacked and any trace of him hidden away, sipping champagne and laughing in the so-said language of love whilst the stripped for a toss in the sheets, in the shower, on the desk – making a mess of whatever papers she had previously tapped into a neat and orderly pile, all whilst he, entirely ignorant, had a beer with his boss at the bar – having been easily found in the otherwise empty chamber where May had delivered an uninspiring speech.

He did not want to make this accusation. If there were any truth to the rumour around his wife’s short, solitary trip to his home town a few weeks prior, he wanted to hold her, to ask with patience, forgiveness and understanding if she was alright, to beg the same of her grace for having so long neglected her physical and emotional needs whilst demanding political and financial support for his own ends. But, as the situation he found himself in forced him to admit, expressing such sentiment failed his character. After nearly two years of sharing his name with one of the most beautiful women on the British Isles, Ban Tarleton remained something of a rouge and felt it within his right and interest to remind Ellie of this through accusations of infidelity. “John, Francis, Patrick,” he began to list of all the share friends he knew her to have slept with in the past.

“What?” Ellie squinted as she continued to fold the duvet on the bed they shared – a bed, but not a blanket, Ban thought as though the furnishings of his sister’s country estate were symbolic of anything other than contemporary fashion.

Ban swallowed, his voice thickened with the sadness threatening to inflame his throat and nose with a sticky phlegm he refused to let turn to tears. “I can’t bear the idea of you with another man, and I hate, Ellie I can’t fucking stand your refusal to extend me the same consideration.” What he meant was that he would have loved the child Abe Woodhull had apparently alleged her as having carried as though it had been his own – was that not evident in his devotion towards Marie? He wondered time and again if Ellie had once wanted to be a mother, if he had robbed her of this before it could have ever entered into his consideration that she would one day answer his proposal with agreement, if her distance and demeanour to the family he had already fathered (be it by pen or lack of protection) was as much an expression of envy as the men who had come before him, who might well semi-clandestinely be replacing him now, if somehow he was at fault if she had had an abortion, or had not.

Ellie seemed unmoved.

“Why should I be jealous?” she countered with a calm he could not match. “I trust you as I wish you would trust me – and, as you seem to indicate, should that trust be misplaced, I find that I can easily console myself with a variation of the same question: Why should I be jealous knowing that you disappointed some other woman, wasting, four, five minutes of her time before hiding from this hypothetical her in a hotel-room shower, wishing her to be gone once you’ve rinsed yourself of guilt and shame, replaced her scent with that of cheap soap … no Ban, I don’t think you’d cheat on me. I don’t think your ego could take it.

“And if looking at me to give a name that you won’t, no, it hasn’t escaped me that you are still in love with your ex, but by the same token - no, by the same token I don’t see Mary as a threat. You love her and thusly want her to be happy, which history has shown is something you can’t provide by the virtue of your presence.”

He knew such would be her response. This was not the first time he had said such things to her. Maybe she had taken his suggestions as an invitation to stray. Maybe he had disappointed her too.
often in bed for her to really need one. Since his operation some years ago, sex hurt to the point of his taking relief in the fact that he often fell short, wanting to scream in his own frustration when the woman he had lusted after for much of his life and was finally able to hold cuddled up to him after the fact as though he warranted her affection. Maybe is was a shared sadness on her part. Maybe it was sympathy. He looked at her, having heard the turmoil she never voiced, feeling her naked body against his own in her muted accusation, her long fingers unconsciously tracing the scars left by bullets in his bare chest as he began to kiss her ferociously as a form of compensation. He remembered Mary’s softer touch when he himself had not been quite so hard, when he had been young, handsome, capable of preforming without pain or struggle.

He did not say anything.

He could not.

He had been examined by enough doctors who told him that there was nothing wrong with him, nothing medically. Maybe his inexact envy was another expression of the same madness his short time in America had caused him to fear finding within himself. “That is not fair-” he started. She cut him off. For this, he was grateful, for how could he continue without betraying more than was meant?

“I would say it is. I would say it is fairer, at any rate, then my finding out that I had an abortion because you and my sister-in-law happen to share a friend in Abe Woodhull, a low-level administrative assistant in some Washington office who you apparently call to discuss menstruation?” she accused, bringing him back to the conflict over which he could consent to speak. “Have you no concept of personal boundaries, about how and why that is wrong?”

“I never said that I was worried that you were pregnant,” Ban tried to backtrack, “those were Abe’s words – not mine -”

“Words that ought never have been his to offer.”

How wrong she was. In the same way he found he could not discuss his own physical hang-ups with her, Ellie’s, which were of far more consequence, were never welcomed into open conversation. She sought to punish him whenever he expressed concern and thus, he had since learned to voice his emotional agony elsewhere – mostly, on long-distance calls to the US under the construct of completing a crossword. Eight letters, he thought of a word sure to work like a nuclear weapon. It needed to be said. “Admit, at least, that you are the most selfish of all people, that you enjoy the burdens you place on everyone who loves you with your anorexic -”

“So, I’m selfish now, am I?” Ellie demanded in a raised octane. “Odd that this is coming from a man who just accused me of not caring whether or not I’m his one and only – frankly, ridiculous in itself for I wouldn’t want to be, you suffocate me as things are. I think you prefer Anna’s version of events, it gives you an enemy you are better matched to defeat, in theory anyway, because you are no match Ban, no,” she smiled coldly, “not for me. Do you really want to know what I was getting up to in Liverpool?”

She took a step toward him, stoked his cheek with the back of her hand before continuing to tie the frilly cravat with which he had been struggling. “The news of the stabbing brought to my attention that territory controlled by my associates was being encroached upon and I did not take kindly to the news. Now I … never like to dirty my own hands in these sorts of dealings so I invented an opportunity for my man to make amends, which he did in the form of three rivals and a storehouse holding millions in powder that I’ve since ensure will never see the street. But when trust is broken – ah! There is really nothing to be done for it,” Ellie laughed without smiling though Ban imagined her to have taken genuine pleasure in the act she was readying to describe. “I took some measure of inspiration from the site of the original attack - the one on the mayor’s aide, far too close to home -
the lad’s office is in the same hall as your little brothers! - had his underlings tie him to a support beam and then made them watch until I felt I had removed enough of his skin with a kebab blade to have made my point – namely, that I don’t tolerate slip ups. Ever. Then,” she allowed herself to grin openly in the wide, unsettling way only a Hewlett could, “well … then, I set the place ablaze and rang the local fire-brigade. The incident was written up as being an explosion in a meth lab. I read about it on my way back to London, you know, same as I read about my having visited the mayoral aide in hospital – Darling, all this is to say that I simply didn’t have time to have an affair, abortion, whatever it is of which you seek to accuse. Also, I was on my period … just a bit. You know how women get during that time of the month.”

“Ellie I’m sorry,” Ban sighed. “About all of it, things said, unsaid – it is only, can’t you, can’t you just permit – for once – me to care about you, to worry for you, to -”

“The world is a much uglier place than you might ever imagine,” she seemed to mock. “Did I have an affair? An abortion to cover it? Your accusations can’t have been in earnest but I promise my answer shall be: I’ll play your adoring wife while Mary and Thomas are here but I want my things packed and shipped to the house you keep in the L8 by the time the hunt has concluded, where I stay until I can find some excuse beyond a love loss you seem determined to make mutual for the separation you equally seem afraid to openly seek. I’ve covered your war crimes, I’ve done most of the dealings with the courts, with your children, with your extended family and you worry that I don’t love you – grow up. Grow up and get out of my way,” she said with a small shove that hurt as though she had instead stabbed him with a dull blade.

When Mary Robinson looked at her ex and his new wife from across the table, she felt as though she was stuck in a city far away, in a conversation she once had with Lady Eleanor in a setting she could no longer place, somewhere, she imagined, on the edge of expectation.

‘Venice,’ the then-noble had phrased it, ‘have you ever been?’

‘Is it worth seeing?’ Mary had wondered.

‘No, that is the curious thing in it. There is nothing there to look at, because so many other eyes chanced upon it first. Souvenirs have replaced culture of any kind, most all of the homes have been turned into hotels, it is easy to get lost on the small canals for every bridge leads one to a place identical to the one from which you’ve come. But then,’ she had paused, almost wistfully, ‘At night – and night falls spectacularly early there year-round - when there are no eyes left to look, a bit of the magic returns to these ruins, if only in that one is truly alone in a place where people should be, and there is a certain peace in that. When I was a girl, I used to watch the tourists entering the castle – all of my siblings did the same from the corner of a second story overlook from where we could not be seen, all doubtlessly possessed by the same thought, the same silent plea; Look! Look! And then this place will one day fade into memory. Yes … it is curious, people don’t realise the destruction of the human gaze, its effects worse than war.’

‘It is only the places we built, and power is always so – it can’t stand against inspection, even admiration,’ Mary both agreed and countered. ‘Your family is famous enough now that your house might well fall, but not within your lifetime, Darling. People who visit Scotland are more interested in its nature which will find a way to withstand. Consider - there is nothing to see at Versailles, especially in the age of individualism where one doubtlessly goes into the mirrored halls to meet their own reflection – but the gardens where confronted with true beauty – both in the form of nature
and the geometric brilliance of minds better than most – there, no one wants to look.’

‘In Versailles, perhaps. Maybe if my ancestral home shared the same mythos as that of the Sun King it would share the same fate of our more widespread local legends. You’ve seen the Loch Ness Monster, you realise,’ she winked. ‘But you’ve not known it, because what you are looking for relies on the description of what others before you have seen.’

‘How do you reason?’

‘The lake itself is the monster, it takes more lives each year than any other we have, and people never simply drown – no, death is always a brutal answer to ego. But perhaps you are right, perhaps people who go, take a tour in the afternoon, get back on a bus and return to their smart hotels in Glasgow or Edinburgh with a plush-toy of something resembling a dinosaur crossed with a seal and a few snapshots for social media they only value in terms of how many people have clicked a wee small heart, maybe these people were not brave enough in themselves to individually warrant the monster’s ire. They have seen him, and they haven’t. Women like us, Mary, who are looked at and up to constantly, we are the same way. We can’t be seen and it is this terribly vicious cycle, because we then feel compelled as individuals to do everything to counter the physical without necessarily offsetting a contradiction. What they see, it is a mere projection of societal expectations at the time we happen to live – with attempts at expression that all seem so futile. You have a way with words that fails me and fails most, but poetry is probably the most open medium to interpretation, rather, to introspection. And then – and still, you are lost within their own ideas.

‘With me, it is less effort. I’m a princess,’ she said with a hint of bitter irony, ‘people who know me from the newsstands think of me first in terms of my title, and then, maybe, on the off chance we’ve met, it is fear, I think – and even that I can’t claim. It is primeval, an evolutionary reaction, and the ways in which I’ve learned to manipulate and manifest this instinct in others have nothing to do with my own efforts – it is just an expression of what they have previously experienced or imagine that others have. Television, mostly,’ she had snorted.

In this shared construct, Mary Robinson had an odd feeling around her eyes and the direction they were pointed, though she tilted her head as to conceal it lest anyone mistake her gaze for envies long forgotten. Ellie was of the sort of beauty that made the task looking away difficult in itself. None of her natural features belonged to what one would describe as ideal, but strong as they might be individually, when taken together on the same face and figure, Ellie was seemingly as delicate as she otherwise was dark. In days passed, days in which Mary had been preoccupied with Ban’s own deep brown eyes and where they wandered, the similarities she saw between herself and this ‘other woman’ served to bother, they shared a nose and a rhinoplasty surgeon, a slightly augmented yet still-tasteful bra-size, an impossibly small waist and a light laugh designed to cover the sounds of starvation from women from whom society demanded less; rather, as Ellie might put it and Mary might poeticize, they were both victims to the modern male gaze. How should their scars look any different when cut by the same sword?

Mary itched her short hair from underneath the wig she wore at breakfast to the same effect. It was uncomfortable, but so was the way Ban looked at her without it.

Ellie wore her long, dark hair back in a thick braid she let fall down to her mid-shoulders rather than pinning it to her head as her sisters-in-law, nieces, and other still new family relations mostly had, not dissimilar from the way she wore it on the piste, looking eerily like to Marie a few years before in the weeks Mary’s daughter had spent with black-brown hair as she waited for the dye to wash out, wondering if her little girl had wanted all along to look more like the blood-princess than the bride of a presumptive heir to some or several peerage seats, same as Ban had to that time confessed in words (in a conversation Mary knew she was not intended to overhear) what his eyes long had – that he
would rather lie with Lady Eleanor than look at her from afar.

All the same, Mary had reason to suspect that Ban still did not trust himself to touch her, and she hated any role she might have had in this schism between desire and manifestation.

Mary continued to believe that she knew Ban better than anyone and loved him better than most though their romance had ended far before their relationship had broken apart. She saw that he still looked at his wife the way he always had, with an attention he ordinarily afforded to no one. Ellie, for her part, looked pissed. She looked like someone who could not quite conceal her anger, despite her better efforts.

Mary did her best not to smile until someone at the table told a joke that brought her back from the Vancian canals which she had never in fact seen (and, insofar as her former rival had once claimed, she never would, for too many had the idea to look.) She laughed because others did, because there was a certain safety in numbers in that they distracted from open strategy.

She knew the happy couple had been fighting and she knew this for such had been part of her design. Mary Robinson knew Banastre Tarleton better than anyone, including himself. She knew that at heart he truly was the decent man he was so preoccupied with trying to project himself as being that a least part of him doubted in his own goodness. She knew also that in acknowledging as much to him openly as she had the night before, she had robbed him of a conflict for which he had the language – Marie would be his on paper as she had nearly always been in practice, as had always been present in her Last Will and Testament, in a private constellation in which Mary herself had never really played a part. There was no one in this world better cast in the role of her child’s father, and no one who might challenge it outside of the courts, for whom Mary had long had an answer.

Thomas, who had left her when she was pregnant, was careful to avoid the same paternal language which he had sixteen years ago thought to condemn any other man who kept Mary’s company with, even when asking to meet the child. She understood her husbands want as much as she understood Ban’s wife’s efforts to emotionally excuse and exclude herself, as much as she understood Marie’s unwillingness to let neither completely have their way.

Ellie had visited Mary at the clinic from time to time, Ban never did and Mary had never asked her daughter to do so. To look at her now, the girl looked as much like Ellie as she had with darkened hair, holding the same posture, both in terms of the way she sat and the unspoken annoyance towards the boy beside her and the extended company to whom she largely did not speak, though he hair, normally pulled back in the same style her idol wore, was loose around her neck and shoulders as to better cover the bruises the boy had given her, lest the Tarletons see them and change tactics, collectively deciding not to let the other child leave their table without contusions of his own. It was at once lighter and darker than her natural tone, a silvery grey that she had said had something to do with a singer called Arianna Grande (but, more likely, was born from Marie’s assumption that this was as bold of a fashion statement as she could make without being sent home with a note from the school for her father to sign.)

Looking at her, Mary saw another girl at risk of being seen too much to be, wondering if her inability to see herself as beautiful was a blessing or a curse, wondering if it would disappear with adolescence as her spots surely would, if on her obligatory school trip to Paris she had been victim to the mirrors when they had gone to Versailles or if she had escaped her French class after a few rooms spent squished between them and fully half of the entire population of the People’s Republic to take refuge in the gardens and write her essay using photographs from the pristine visitor’s pamphlets that themselves did more for the idea of historical conservation than opening the palace to public interests ever could. She wondered what factors might define her daughter when she would be old enough to understand the question – if she would be in college (and where), what novels she
would have by then read and what passages she would underline to return to ponder anew at some later date, if she would be seeing someone, how much the world would see of her and if it would make her confident (as it did Mary) or hyper-conscious (as was the case with Ellie), or, if instead (like her Tarleton aunts), Marie would not have a care for such either way.

With this thought, Mary realise that she would never know for certain. She would be buried by December and she felt Death’s sickle in her daughter’s eyes in the short stare they shared.

Marie sat the way her step-mother did because, as she no doubt saw it, Ellie had yet to completely abandon her the way Thomas had, the way she was about to, the way her dad never would. And Mary reasoned, Marie would have been right. Had Ban instead been the one to grow ill, he would have suffered in silence until his final breath, same as his father had before him (albeit without him noting any symmetry between this hypothetical situation and the one that he was still on the other side of, holding much the same unspoken resentment towards his father that Marie now held towards her.) Ban would have happily suffered for Marie’s sake, for he had somehow been led to believe that that is what love was, and maybe that was true of some people, but, as Mary knew, it was not any way to live, though there were few proper ways to die and fewer still when one was comparatively young.

They were, both of them, envious that she had made her peace with it, which was half the reason why Mary wanted to meet her semi-estranged ex and daughter on grounds she knew to invite conflict.

They needed a fight, and the Tarletons certainly knew how to mêlée.

Mary herself was no longer seen as a contender, having surrendered to Death in the same sense that Ban had surrendered to the bullshit spewed by Modern Psychologic and Pedagogic Practice in his determination to make a show of a brave face by not confronting her, by telling Marie that she ‘should do her best to enjoy her time with her mum while she had it rather than wasting what might be beautiful moments on anger and resentment’ as though he honestly thought such would benefit her in some way, that in fifteen years their daughter would not find herself on some therapist couch complaining about her father only to then be given solutions sure to lead to further business at some other future point. It was a solution for sustained business. Nothing more. The only shrink Mary had ever had a conversation with was the now-discredited, missing and thought to be dead John André, and (perhaps as such) she had since credited the science with as little value as she did the ideas men seemed to have of their own charms. Her daughter, as she saw it, needed to scream and needed to use her voice to do so rather than with one (of the presumably many) million-euro Italian sportscars of her elder cousin with his sorely misplaced engineering genius.

Mary again scratched behind her ear, under her wig, if only to remind Ban that she was wearing one. With the adoption paperwork, she had taken away any external cause for anger between them and he had to break down a blame her that they would have any chance at true forgiveness, that Marie would cease feeling guilty about her own obvious resentment, that she would feel free to ask her questions that Mary might yet find the answers her daughter so desperately needed and she herself needed to give.

But Ellie was pissed at Ban, and though Mary had no idea exactly why, she was happy at the development; not because she wished ill on either of them, quite the opposite in fact. She knew Banastre Tarleton better than anyone and loved him better than most and as such knew him to be a better lover when reminded of how very far he had to go to prove himself in that regard.

He was better in a battle, and Ellie - Ellie lived only for the sake of the conflicts she started but was seldom invited to engage in.
How sad it was, Mary mused, to be so looked at without being seen.

Ban gazed at Ellie attentively though she paid him no mind. They would have it out soon if they had no already and by the time Ban had concurred his demons or Ellie had surrendered enough to hers to fake an orgasm out of a sense of obligation present only in the reminder of the mortality of all things, the two might truly engage each other in fights harder still, fights, that none the less needed to be had.

In the meantime, they were all made to made to settle for and into one of the debates between Ban’s siblings.

“Like a girl,” Charlotte Wessex (née Tarleton) echoed her elder brother. “You know what else I’ve managed to do like a fuck’n g’rl?” she demanded in a think scouse, causing Mary to question which comical dialect was more put-on at this stage of mild diaspora, the Merseyside Standard or the exaggerated RP-accent Charlotte and Ban pretended at in the south and Clayton and William (who lived even further abroad) used at all times.

The accusation itself was around a breakup when Charlotte couldn’t have been older than fifteen. Mary looked at her daughter, glad that whatever had transpired between her and the Wellesley boy, Marie was able to handle it with a (however copied) grace that seemed to allude her soon-to-be aunt nearly half a century after the fact.

Clayton’s only response to this outburst was to roll his eyes, either at his sister or at their mother (who herself had likewise grown up and gone on to work in the world of sport where far more colourful language was exchanged on the regular) as Mrs. Tarleton scolded her eldest daughter to conduct herself as a lady ought. With this phrasing, Mary’s eyes shifted briefly back to her ex’s current, delicately sipping her coffee, the cup doubtlessly hiding a half smile that spoke of an intent to kill.

The current conversation (among many occurring simultaneously at a table of this size) was around how difficult it was to come into this family, Charlotte’s impossibly rich husband Danny having been found having a laugh over the extended family’s shared peculiarities and particulars with the working-class girl John was currently seeing. “It is like a bad rendition of a novel of the nineteenth century left better to York Notes,” Danny whispered to the young woman with a prettier voice than she had face as his wife continued to fight with one of her siblings. It didn’t help that half the table was in traditional riding dress, looking something like redcoat officers arguing over a coming offensive rather than twenty-first century attorneys, executives and politicians who just happened to have come from a family that had at some point in its sordid history acquired some land, doubtlessly through nefarious means. “It happens that brothers hate each other, but one doesn’t talk about it,” Mary echoed to her would-have-been (but for her own better sense) brother-in-law with a quote.

Individually, insofar as Mary could tell through a humour which she had long shared with the spouses and significant others on such family get-togethers, none of the Tarleton children were as close-minded as they could prove under their own company. Before, when Ban had shared her bed, she would laugh at his family’s claim at being among the oldest in England, telling him the Norman Conquest suggested French ancestry if they were all so keen to call upon glories passed, and she would keep on with such quips until he abandoned whichever gripe he had found with the continent, sharing her laughter as he professed knowledge (if not practical skill) of the ways his half-imagined forefathers might well have kissed. To look about the table, at Africans both black and Arab, at Italians, South Americans, Scots and Irishmen, at how very un-English the guest list had now looked for years, it was easy to imagine that the family had opened with the passing of time, but when seated together, the siblings fought to determine who among them was the most xenophobic, putting on or playing up prejudice as situationally appropriate they way they seemed to do in switching between Liverpudlian and Oxford-approximate accents.
Angela, who sat to Danny’s right, laughed her understanding. Her last name was Miller but the Tarletons collectively had understood ‘Van der Bank’ out of ‘from the bank’ until she had shown up that morning, distinctively not Dutch (which might have come as a relief, to Mummy Dearest at least, no doubt still hoping one of the children she had otherwise raised on the wrong side of history would marry an Anglican.) Angela, whatever else her actual surname might have suggested, was evidently the same girl the family-youngest had chanced upon while dialling a collection agency to settle one of Ban’s debts a few years prior, who had upon sorting the matter with her on series of extended telephone calls opened a card himself that the conversation might continue – preferably over a candlelit dinner. He had been seeing her ever since, secretly, and claimed to his siblings before all present that he had hidden his affair because he was ashamed of them rather than whatever ideas they whispered about his being ashamed of her (specifically, about her not being from money.) The rest Mary simply made up for herself when Marie had begun mimicking the young woman’s slight Yorkshire accent to her dismay and Ban’s unconcealed amusement. Angela (according to Mary) had grown up a single child in a loving home with two parents and modest means. She had completed a degree but struggled finding a job out of school in a recession economy and either had enough dignity not to exploit her Tarleton connection or enough sense not to make that sort of deal.

The Tarletons (as they never tired of reminding the city even when not explicitly stated) were Liverpool’s oldest and most powerful family, a distinction obtained through centuries of seeing any rival to that claim defeated in battle or ballet-box or, alternatively, courted and kept. The current standing matriarch belonged to a footballing dynasty by virtue of her birthname and, approaching seventy, still worked as an arbitrator between the Merseyside outfit and its Official Supporters Club of which she still remained president (in the fragile sense of democracy present only in sport and in military-backed regimes south of the equator) effectively making Everton and Tarleton synonymous (something helped by the fact that the actual owner lived in Monaco and rarely attended matches more than it was hindered by ties established by the current generation to more glamorous clubs down on the continent.) Her late husband, the city’s long-serving mayor, had been in with a hooligan firm (to Mary’s mind, though she had no evidence of this outside of the elegant clothing the family seemed to favour) and Mary imagined the two meeting in a scene of carnage outside of Goodison Park, replacing the tracksuits of a visiting frim with knee-breeches and colourful stockings, adding a barricade to this phantasy for an operatic touch intended only in irony. The seven children that followed were an extension of this laughable melodrama, this midtable side who constantly and continually misjudged their own odds and made up the difference with insult and spectacle.

“So, yea, yea, in my moment of devastation, this cunt,” Charlotte indicated to Clayton, “comes to me and tells me to stop crying, I’m making problems in his locker room. Problems! I think to myself, oh, I’ll show you problems. I went to watch a practice the next day, picked out one of Henry’s mates not entirely at random –”

“My grandfather was a racist,” Marie clarified to her school mate. Arthur nodded, either knowing or not requiring explanation. Mary sighed but Danny laughed. “They all are when they get together,” he said with the sort of joviality the admission should not have contained, but which Mary understood as his having won, especially in his use of the present tense. Ban’s “pureblood” parents were impossible to please, but Danny, with his skin dark as night, had negotiated himself a marriage to the late Mayor’s favourite daughter and given his colour to their shared children – something that perhaps a victory against the sort of bigotry that was easy to pretend had fallen out of fashion (at least on this side of the Atlantic, the Americans were an issue unto themselves) somewhere over history’s tendencies towards empire, towards hard nationalism (empire again, then war, then again nationalism, then again war, then progressivism some mistook for peace, then nationalism once more …) were it not for the fact that Danny (at least when seated at the Tarleton table) would almost happily tell that his family had made its comparable fortune in the early modern era by the same horrendous means – engaging in armed conflicts in East Africa with the intention of selling enslaved
prisoners of war to Arab and European traders, escaping to London on the eve of colonialization and applying the same violence-based business-savvy to the capitol. (‘You think you scare me, man?’ he reportedly laughed to his wife’s father when he was still around. ‘Our ancestors might not have been of the same complexion but they were certainly cut from the same cloth. Stop pretending to yourself that history belongs to white men simply because European travesties are better studied. I’m continuing to profit from business developed along your trade routes, whereas Liverpool as a port city would have all but fallen off the map were it not for your … Scottish friends and the business they bring to cover that which they don’t pay into your coffers. Yea, “Rule, Britannia! rule the waves: Britons never will be slaves.” Keep telling yourself that, mate.’)

To look at their children now, it would seem that such animosity had been bred out, but who could say how Danny and Charlotte spoke in their own home and what their sons and small daughter might later repeat as a tool of rhetoric. Mary, who did not otherwise put much stock into psychology, had heard in passing that children were want to wed themselves to someone similar to the parent of the opposite sex, and this was a ground for how problems persisted throughout generations. The Tarletons seemed to have taken the idea to its literal extreme, and maybe there was something within it that worked, or it served the basis of why she and Ban never had. Mary was smart enough to know herself to be incredibly superficially in expensive ways and Ban was beautiful, flash, and victim to a gambling problem that had become increasingly impossible to support, eventually leading to a decade-long spiral of her frustrations with him serving as a muse until eventually the records stopped spinning. He had since married another obvious incarnation of his independently wealthy and utterly scrupulous father (same as Ellie, for her part, had in Ban married a realpolitiker with just enough of a wink back at the idealism of youth that his practice did not entirely match his party’s platform, in other words, an answer to the rejection she had felt all her life from her own parents, something that seemed commonplace in families of a certain size.)

William, the eldest heir to the Tarleton name, had married one of the daughters of a northern Italian business dynasty (who kept her own, seeing Agnelli as more valuable), who routinely referred to everyone in her nation’s south as being ‘fucking Arabs’; Clayton’s wife was the descendent of literal Nazis, the cowardly kind who fled to South America to avoid prosecution after the war. Emma had commented earlier to everyone’s horror when her mother opened the topic of marriage that actually, she had been married more times that she cared to count in the small flat Ban kept in Toxteth without ever having felt the need to notify the court house. (“I don’t see why not,” Chiara Agnelli coughed to herself upon hearing this, “It isn’t as though your going to Church on Sunday having spent Saturday night in Sodom.”) Mary wondered if the judgement stemmed from the fact that Emma’s lover was a Muslim or and Asian, for certainly, similar accusations to that latter “flaw” might have been equally thrown at Ellie, who, if she was not cautious, would return from her ride looking not dissimilar to the peasant opium farmers her noble house employed in Afghanistan, whose blood had reportedly found its way into the line at some point during the wars of colonization (which the Tarletons still seemed to fight in private though slights and side glances, and the Hewletts continued to encourage and exploit for profit, for a rose by any other name, Mary mused, surely still had thrones.)

“I am so glad we don’t have Fox News in the UK,” she said to the extended company to whom she felt the closest (at the moment, Angela, largely on the virtues Mary had herself ascribed to the girl both in boredom and in a want for like-minded company.) Marie continued to ignore her and nearly everyone else in the show she was making of being embarrassed of Arthur in an unconscious imitation of the step-mother she so idolized (which Mary could not entirely fault – she found it amusing in itself and would have been equally as embarrassed had it been her who had kissed a chap whose haircut was so poor it had to be by intention, whom Chiara was also eying as though to ask which unfavourable Bundesliga side she might push academy players on after every team in the Premiership, Championship, and FC Bayern Munich had already passed (in that order) before cutting her loses. Was Schalke still in contention in Europe?)
“Fuck your racism,” Charlotte countered Mary’s assessment by continuing to attack her slightly older brother. “All the birds! My idea was to kill all the birds with the same fucking stone. To retain my honour by being the first to move on, to piss off Daddy,” she said, pausing too long with a look to Arthur and a wink to Marie (causing the girl to sink in her chair and her parents to laugh as had been the agreed upon method of infringing corporal punishment for the events that had found Marie and her friend at the police station the night before), “and turn muffled arguments into open warfare in Clayton’s bloody locker-room. But any road, after we’ve had our first kiss and the who school’s found out and Danny and I were the talk of the town, my darling, darling brother – my hero, my protector - pulls me aside and masking complaint for concern, tells me he is not really comfortable with me dating, especially knowing the ways that lads talk about girls in their own company,” she paused, turning to the other women to deliver an aside, “I don’t know, I suppose under the assumption that we ladies don’t do the same with more depravity,” Charlotte laughed. “I begin, of course, to relay this but then he interrupts me with some crap about casting a wider net – namely – he wanted a new winger, saw how fast this one kid … oh, don’t get me started on this one kid, I don’t know. As I doubt Clayton would have been taking any other advanced classes, the two must have had Physical Education together, some contest of sprint. Any road. Didn’t ever care if he could play footy or not, just wanted him to cover a player from the other team so he could best shine when he knew there would be a scout in attendance. Who were you playing?” she asked, continuing without waiting for memory to answer. “Doesn’t matter. Clayton’s own unrefined recruitment methods had failed and,” she laughed ironically, “he honestly thought to whore me out for scouting purposes of his own.”

“All the birds, sister mine,” Clayton repeated with a wry grin. “Did my designs fail to produce?”

“You don’t honestly think,” Charlotte gasped. “No. Christfuck – no! First, Edmund Hewlett was bloody terrified of me. It is neither here nor there but I think he still is. Second, I was absolutely disgusted by him – neither here nor there, but still am. Alas, Anna can have him,” she expanded with an edge of poorly-acted wistful-drama. “I personally think she could have done better for herself but then I suppose with American prospects of social mobility mirroring our own there were only so many routes for even someone coming from a political dynasty to wed herself into greater power, property and wealth and even I’d take a Hewlett over, say, a Trump – Oh, Ellie,” she stopped herself, noting her sister-in-law’s expression, “not you … you are fine … so is Ivanka, for that matter. Begs the questions of how the sons of great men pale in comparison to daughters of the same line, but so does sitting at this table. Any road, do you want to know how I convinced him – impressment, ‘innit? The way the military has been doing it for years. I threatened force.”

“Is this the future of feminism?” Ellie asked broadly, breaking a piece of her bread and using it to move food around her plate to give the illusion she was eating without bringing anything to her mouth. Mary wondered if she was entirely conscious of this. Whatever the stated reasons for the shared tension between Ban and the woman he had replaced her with, Mary knew her presence was at least in part responsible. Her ex had as complicated a relationship with death as he did any other far reaching abstract and the reminder Mary offered him of its approach if only through her loss of looks seemed to complicate his relationship with everyone else. Ellie was not eating. Mary scratched at an itch she did not in fact have, again calling attention to her wig. Proxy-wars had their worth, but Mary wished someone would open actual fire.

“We … incentivise in more civil ways now,” her ex responded to his sister of life in the armed force. “Benefits that almost add up to what these men could stand to make on the open market.”

“If only all of our other servicemen had the connections to marry into wealth,” Emma mused, mocking him, her mother’s views on the institution and perhaps the market more broadly.

“I was a millionaire when I proposed,” Ban defended as though it made a difference. Ellie raised an
eyebrow but did not respond. She had always had too much money to stop and consider what it was worth and doubtlessly considered wealth a classless subject in and of itself. Mary felt Thomas nudge her, at having seen the same unspoken slight. He was an economic reporter. His publication, Mary reasoned, did not print the names of its journalist in order to shield them from the judgement of the majority of its regular readership. Mary suddenly felt anger at Ellie, her pseudo-liberalism and the insult she offered to everyone who ever had to wonder how they were going to afford something vital simply through small behaviours that made her refusal to respond to her proper title of “Lady” an afford to the feminist rhetoric she spewed in her rejection. She looked at Ban as he looked at her, a stronghold conquered but which he could not afford to keep. He likely had wanted to please her with his knighthood, but, perhaps, it was impossible for her to see him as it was for him to see her. Part of it, Mary knew, was her fault, part of it was Ellie’s and most of the rest was probably Effie Gwillim’s yellow paper. Banastre Tarleton had too many people looking at him to ever be seen, even (especially) when his intentions were ultimately good.

“You bet a few hundred quid of Leicester winning the league,” William responded to this assertion with an eyeroll, “that is hardly earned income.”

“I know you all like to pretend amongst yourselves that I’m not as clever or cunning in this respect, but the fact of the matter is, every contract into which one enters is a gamble and I happened to pick just as well as the rest of you,” Ban interrupted.

“Didn’t you bet the same amount on sixteen of the eighteen clubs in the Prem that year?” Arthur asked.

“Every year,” William answered for him.

“So how is that –” the boy began, interrupted by the sound of sliver cutlery met with glass.

“You all married better than I’d expected you could,” the old dame said as though she expected the argument to end, adding to Emma with something that might have been called a smile, “Well, almost,” thus indicating that she just wanted to re-join the fray. “And you weren’t a millionaire, Banastre. You spent half your sudden fortune paying your siblings back for sorting your gambling debts and the other half running a losing campaign for local office.”

“I bought a house, too.”

At this, John laughed. “You bought a condemned building in an unfashionable postcode your wife’s family then went and renovated at your bequest, half of the reason I was not shocked when you married her some months later.”

“All I asked was that Ellie send someone in her employ to help me build some furniture I’d bought at IKEA because as my girls were coming to visit for the weekend and I’d not want to call on you, brother mine.”

“You would rather have some contracted killer in your home than me?” John smirked in response.

“Pardon –” Ellie stood as though she meant to handle the accusation (or open acknowledgement) herself. Good, Mary thought.

“Quite right,” Ban grinned, motioning for his wife to retake her seat with his single hand. “I love the imagery of a hired hitman struggling with a three-millimetre Allen-wrench key that came in a bag of nuts and bolts whereas I’m … lukewarm on you, at best, dear brother.”

“I’m so sorry,” Marie whispered to her friend. “they are not always like this. They are just … excited
about the hunt this afternoon.”

“Don’t be,” Arthur returned, “this is the most entertained I’ve been in some time.” Mary nodded in spite of her better strategy. The Tarleton table always brought out the absolute worst in everyone who ate from it, and this, perhaps, was for the best.

“Attty!” Anne Wellesley hissed. Until now, she had taken most of the morning in stride and with a healthy bit of humour. Picking her up from the airport, Mary and Thomas and told the little woman (herself alternating between apologises for her son’s behaviour and increasingly vivid descriptions of the various punishments she intended to implement) of how they had sorted things the night before, namely by laughing and the tragic lovers and their fatal (or, rather, ill-fated) kiss. Embarrassment, Mrs. Wellesley agreed, was the most effective form of dissuasion (not that Marie wasn’t a “lovely girl,” her son had been grounded a day earlier on other grounds, had run away to Liverpool in protest and used a family tragedy in which he had no business mingling as reason to steal a million-euro-sportscar he could barely handle for the purpose of a little joy ride. The fault, as she saw it, was entirely his.)

Now, Arthur seemed determined to prove her right in this assessment, and Ban – who had indeed been betting on his extended family to be at their worst as they prepared themselves mentally for the afternoon fox hunt to convince his teenage daughter that it simply was not worth it to bring boys home or be out with them in any sense – seemed ready and willing to succumb to the worst within him simply on the merit that he had taken a strong disliking to the lad for reasons that extended any concern over Marie’s safety and wellbeing.

Marie, for her part, already looked like she regretted every snap-second decision that had brought her classmate and the man who had raised her to the same table. Mary shared her small wince. By and large, she was assured that her daughter was on the right path despite the recent stumble for the self-same reason that gave Ban such exaggerated worry – namely, that she was still just a teenager. She had time to make mistakes without accruing lasting consequence and a large family who, for all of their ills, truly did love her. For all of the siblings’ prior criticism of Ban and herself, Marie had never been a point of contention.

Then, they already had enough matters to set them at odds – slights real and simply imagined that would never go forgotten throughout the years. Arthur, Mary assessed, would not last a minute.

“I don’t know, I still don’t see how anything I did was wrong,” Clayton said. “Charlotte could obviously handle herself and clearly enjoyed scaring the shit out of Edmund Hewlett – something that to recall what he was like as a younger man, we all quite liked having had happen. I got him to play the position I needed to let myself shine and then got to return to Liverpool a few weeks later, having met my objective of impressing the scout.”

“I think the problem is that after you left Edmund took up the captaincy,” Danny informed him with a meanness he did not bother to disguise.

“The problem, my love,” Charlotte corrected through a clenched tooth smile, “is clearly that he tried to sell me - his own sister - for negligible gains. How did Everton treat you, brother dearest?”

“I heard my true calling and learned my trade,” Clayton smiled. In the time that had elapsed since he had become the assistant sporting director at an Italian side that William, acting as his agent, had once tried to sell him to.

“I mean – you didn’t have to play under him,” Danny continued to argue about and against the absent Edmund Hewlett.
“It was for half a season and then he left school and you got the armband which, if you wish to speak of the Final Days of Rome, I’m told you then let fall into my brother’s hands,” Clayton countered.

“I was elected fairly,” Ban broke in.

“You bought the team with Jaffa Cakes,” Ellie countered with more vitriol than Mary expected from her.

“Bread and circuses, my love. How do you think the game is played?”

“The question is, how do you?” John asked before addressing the rest of the table. “Ban had this obsession with José Mourinho’s methods in that brief period at his first stint at Chelsea before he had been found out, and thus had us play every match with a parked bus for something like two seasons. A travesty.”

“We still like him at Inter, José,” Maria shrugged, before looking to her father to make sure she had not spoken out of line. Clayton patted her small head, turning her want for approval into a muted protest.

Ordinarily, Maria would be made to dine with her younger sisters and cousins in the adjacent hall, but had been bumped up to the “grown-ups” table when Ethan had arrived with his girlfriend (an expected addition), his school friend from a lesser branch of the House of Saud (who himself owned a home in the area) and around twenty of the prince’s retainers (who it would be unseemly to sit at the same brunch least of all for the fact that insofar as Mary could tell the prince was on his seventh mimosa and his servants, presumably, were paid by his father.) So, while the bodyguards sat with the “bambini” (as Maria had taken to calling everyone over whom she had slight age-seniority), the little girl had been doing her best to act like an adult so that she not be asked to abdicate her seat when there were more chairs to be had at the other, smaller table. The head patting likely came at the highest of insults, so Mary was happy at seeing Mrs Wellesley (“call me Anne!”) respond to Maria’s frown by combing at her gangly son’s mullet in the same overly-parental fashion (“Atty, did you really gel your hair to look like this?” Anne asked when the gesture had been a joke, a gesture of solidarity with the little girl, before such action seemed to give cause for legitimate criticism, “when are you going to grow out of this awkward phase? I honestly don’t know what I am meant to do with you anymore […]”) It had the effect of making Clayton stop, Ban, his mother and other siblings laugh, Marie sink slightly in her chair, and Arthur, presumably, as determined as Maria and every other average ten-year old girl and seventeen-year-old-boy to show how mature he truly was (to the same predictable effect.)

“If Brexit happens, will you take him back?” Izzie asked Internazionale Milano’s assistant sporting director (read: glorified scout) in earnest. For all of the drama promised by around her affair with the stable boy and the pregnancy that had resulted, she had gotten off fairly easy at breakfast the morning after the two lovers had been permitted to see each other once more. Then, Mary wondered why she had ever expected otherwise. She liked Jason on his own merits, the Tarletons seemed to have decided by majority consensus to silence their disapproval - Emma and John (who had since fallen back into sharing the role of family disappointment with Izzie back in favour) being the holdouts. Jason had been invited to breakfast but had declined with respect, wanting to ready the horses for the hunt more than half the household was set to go on, perhaps not wanting to toast and break bread with his soon-to-be-sister-in-law with whom he was still in open dispute. He had found the best way to be part of this family and would make a good husband to Izzie, who sat smiling as though this was precisely how she had always assumed things would eventually transpire.

Mary smiled to herself wondering why she had ever expected anything else of the lot of them.

“Madame, if Brexit happens,” Arthur (The Self-Asserting Adult) interjected before the addressed
could answer Izzie’s question, “the last of anyone’s concerns is going to be a lack of foreigners in English football.”

“That is easier to say when you’ve Roy the Boy at your helm rather than Big Sam,” Ban muttered.

“He’s never lost at Anfield since Liverpool fired him,” Arthur agreed of Hodgson’s record.

“No,” Ellie gave. Mary could tell her continued discontentment was not around some points dropped a few years back and was beginning to wonder if it was her place to ask.

“So, if you were like José when you were my age, was Mr Simcoe your Juan Mata?” Marie asked.

“He is like my Paul Pogba these days, that much is certain,” Ban answered after a long inhale.

“You’ve seen the papers then?” Chiara asked eagerly, her suddenly wide and woken eyes scanning the faces at the table for a hint of recognition. Mary, for her part, had no idea what the Italian heiress was on about.

“What do you care?” William asked his wife when it seemed no one else would. “He’s not at Juve anymore, you’ll probably never be in a position to play him at Uno again.”

“No, not Pogba,” his wife shook her head as she continued excitedly, “about John Simcoe and Effie Gwillim. Apparently, she was seeing his estranged younger brother who grew up in a separate household – they were both invited to Easter at his – that is, the younger brother’s parent’s place - independently of one another, of course. Then - and this is where it gets good - having spent a single night under the same roof, the two former lovers ran off together and were last seen at a post hotel, Effie wearing a huge rock on her little ring finger, the brother, having discovered the affair, driving back to London, disenchanted with the entire idea of family, romance, whatever. But that is not even the best part! Simcoe has a woman in the United States, and when I say ‘has a woman’ I mean, he has three children with her and, and, and! When the papers sent a few Washington correspondents out to do a follow-up, they uncovered that Simcoe’s domestic partner has been living with her ex-husband and his new boyfriend in secret for the entire duration of their affair – the one resulting in multiple pregnancies! I mean, right? Say what you will about our family, we are not half so dysfunctional as -.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain,” Ban frowned. “Percy Nantaba is in my wife’s employ. Ellie and I spent the night before last in the same hotel as the Graves, this place when John was said to have proposed to his ex-fiancée – something, knowing the man, I doubt he would have the nerve to pursue even if it were in his interests to do so, especially with Queen Margaret a room over.”

“I swear by that woman,” Charlotte claimed, bringing her hand to her heart in dramatic fashion. Mary snorted back a laugh.

“Oh, I know so do I,” Angela agreed, losing all of the imagined honour and virtue Mary now saw she had been too quick to ascribe. “Do you have the app?”

“There is an app?” Chiara asked.

“Here,” Angela answered, pulling out her mobile device for display. “Maggie, are the rumours about your niece and kind-of nephew true?”

>>If you are going to sell assumptions as tough they re fact, at least let your headlines be interesting. << Margaret Spinkels, editor of Vogue UK and outspoken feminist otherwise, advised them all, silencing the room for a short time. Mary was not convinced of her credentials, owing mostly to the fact that, while running The Daily Mail, Margaret Spinkels had called her “the English Sappho[e]” –
an insult that would have run the risk of being literary were it not for an intentional misspelling. In the time since, however, Margaret had managed to convince everyone else that she was deserving of the crown they thought to bestow, which was indeed impressive (Mary had to admit) giving that her publication’s premise was the imposing male expectations on women’s fashion trends.

“It is as though she is here among us,” Mrs Tarleton whispered in awe before addressing her youngest son’s date directly, asking her to download the program for her and show her how it worked. Anne Wellesley wanted it, too. Mary wondered why anyone would pay to hear that voice in particular.

Ellie, frustrated, took her leave of them without bothering to excuse herself before conversation again stated around Simcoe, his string of alleged lovers and the others to whom these women were bound. Mary had half a mind to join her, but in the end decided it was not her place. Ellie needed to be by herself, as alone and empty as a Vancian night.

Chapter End Notes

...eh? Sod it. I tried.

When this was originally posted, I had notes, mostly sport related, but being as my known audience likely has a passing familiarity with THW Kiel and whatever other loose references were thrown out without too terribly much context, in the interest of getting this “update” out in a “timely” manner (I got hit by a lot this past week or so, ladies!) I am just going to leave it off for now with a passing thought:

I do stupid shit out of what I suppose is a pathological need to be liked/accepted/whatever in this strange social construct where I can’t simply buy my company in steamed almond-milk and flavoured syrup pretending to be “coffee”, beer, cider and shots during sport, pub trivia, and dancing (respectively), unpaid labour (NEVER offer to help type a friend’s thesis as I learned in the past week – you will come to hate certain words without and beyond reason) or just by invites to whatever stupid party I’m hosting (all for those five minutes a week I can pretend to myself that I’m “charming” or “special” in some way before returning to fake smiles and deeply seeded cynicism. („[lächeln] Das tut kein Deutscher. Die schauen grimmig drein dabei, weil sie es nicht wissen, dass Kultur Parodie ist …“)) Tja. Anyway. I think the internet version of trying desperately for affection as an ersatz for all the qualities one anticipates in others but can’t find in one’s own self (or one’s own writing) is to take on other people’s OFCs in the form of too ambitious gift-works.

And OMG, am I way over my head in my current projects of kind.

Be it writing or artwork, I am so far from feeling I can evenly approach the brilliance of these people I admire that I uh … I came on a sport reference because that is like the one thing I can reliably do. Check it: ‘[X] is like Pep’s City, perfect in every conceivable aspect and even though one could reasonably expect every fixture to be a one-sided affair, the game play is so beautiful and exciting that you can’t help but watch on with wonder, thinking you’ve never seen footy (an OFC) done right until now. … [Y] is
Klopp’s Liverpool – exciting, attacking, impossible to remain neutral towards, yet you expect them to drop points in unexpected ways which only serves to make every match (chapter) that much more compelling. And how do the lovely ladies of H+S compare/compete? Pfft!,’ thought I, ‘Millwall!’

I’m only sharing this because this chapter in particular has made that observation absolutely hilarious to me, especially in the sudden realization that followed that in the headline to my AO3 profile, I basically refer to myself in terms of a “cupset” and … right, specific to the Millwall analogy, I’m sure you both by now know about what happened to Everton (both club and supporters) at The Den in the fourth round of the FA Cup a few weeks back and sweet Lord, that is exactly what I did to/with the fictional/fictionalized first family of that same town in this.

I don’t think I can really do anything for damage control at this point, but as “art” imitates life, arrests have since been made, life bans awarded, and here, at least, I hope the edit serves as some consolation for what you were made to suffer if you read the original. (Though the bad rep, I’m well sure, will stick. To be honest I’m completely fine with that. I have no idea what I’m meant to do with adjectives such as “likeable” – such was never my creative intent. As confessed, I’m as “complicated” as my writing is unfavourably accused of being, but uh … not all that deep. One doesn’t need to dig to discover how dark I am at heart.)

Despite all that, I hope you enjoyed, and if not, while I doubt that I will do another edit, I can recommend well over a thousand fics that will likely better meet your fancy. Just click on the Turn tab. ;) I got you, boo.

Up Next: Murray Wallace’s late goal proves a decent argument in favour of VAR, or, Effie and John make out in a rental car. Yep.
An Error of Judgement

Chapter Summary

After a fight with his estranged brother leads to a few unfavourable headlines, John discovers just how distant he has been at home and tries to return before it is too late. In an effort to help out her ex with his current, Effie gets the scoop on a breaking news story and crosses a line on her way out to cover it. Ellie and Ban fight and make up and are about to get in on when it is made clear exactly how small their private sphere can prove.

Chapter Notes

I’m a day late. Sorry about that.

But since it feels like we just did this and this is *still* an edit of the chapter that just did not go down, I’m not going to spend too terribly much time on an introduction, but I just want to put something out there, specifically this Oral B spot: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbIITvlz8lM.

(To save the twenty-one seconds you’ve probably already spent with it, she is saying “It is difficult to brush teeth at home exactly as my dentist recommends, but it is possible with this product -) but then! Then she goes on to brush without toothpaste and thusly I (as a consumer) can’t really trust the advice she is getting from her dentist, like, at all.

There is not point to my sharing that observation and opinion. It isn’t even a segue. It is just a really stupid, simple detail for the marketing team to have overlooked. Cheers, then. Enjoy some mostly new IA. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John Graves Simcoe projected his abstract aggravation around the rental car on the absent woman who had asked him to return it to the airport, having herself called upon an unfortunate assistant to bring a Maserati she had parked at a posh London address up to Leicester for private use on a holiday weekend without so much as a nod to labour laws or to the work-life-balance of the young woman hoping to make it in fashion (whose name, as John had rightly suspected, Margaret Spinkels had herself forgotten as soon as she had set her phone aside after making this demand.) Although his personal interest in automobiles did not extend much past the few pages of whichever men’s publication his children’s paediatrician happened to stock, John though the Gran Cabrio utterly wasted on a woman who had settled on this particular economy-class mid-sized-sedan with a slightly dated navigation system that always told him to turn too late and was impossible to turn off.

According to the GPS, it took two and a half hours to drive from Leicester to Liverpool, but thus far, he had been behind the wheel for more than four without the end – or the airport from where he had been able to book a last-minute direct flight to DC – anywhere in sight.

The navigation system yelled at him again in the form of beeping, reminding him of the speed limit,
informing him that he was ever-so-slightly over (despite having set cruise control to avoid the cursed safety feature.) Thie rude radio disruption (or perhaps rather the manner in which his fingers tapped against the steering wheel in response) prompted his passenger to ask for what felt the hundredth time in the past hour (though in reality it was only the seventeenth) if she should drive instead. John Graves Simcoe moved to turn off his hearing aid, happy when it occurred to him in the silence that immediately fell that Margaret Spinkels was about to be billed with an overage charge for his failure to return the rental by two in the afternoon. She deserved nothing less for her less-than-discerning choice in transportation and, with the thought of her being set back in the form of sixty-five quid he knew she would fail to notice, he felt a light smile cross his lips for the first time since he had woken up that morning.

Effie Gwillim continued to talk. Occasionally, John humoured his ex with small sounds that might indicate he was listening, whilst he wondered if this woman (who for so long had been the source of his happiness before becoming an obstacle to it) had ever really heard him when she truly had him engaged, when they had truly been engaged, or at any point in the past day before or after he had put a ring on her finger - a ring that still refused to part ties.

No, he decided without affording the question much further consideration. She did not care for him at all.

Effie’s entire attention was spent on her running internal monologue which for some reason he could not quite fathom, she felt compelled to share in the form of questions about the brother he had never really taken any steps to know until the opportunity had passed, until his practice proposal had found Percy at the door to his hotel room where he had been given the explanation that ‘this is not what it looks like’, until Percy had responded that it was ‘close enough’.

Probably, John had thought at the time, he himself would have responded the same way had he been on the other side of the situation.

The sequence of events that followed him into the morning after had since proven what had been a passing assumption.

When Percy had turned to leave seconds after his ‘close enough’ had left his lips, Effie - crying and in a hotel bathroom much too large for her petit frame - had pursued the man back to the truck in which he had arrived only minutes earlier, John following the party in the confused idea that his continued presence might dissuade escalation.

‘I wanted you to meet my family,’ Percy, exasperated, told Effie as he moved to stop him from climbing into the passage side. ‘John never wanted to be mine until, well, until you entered the picture. Maybe he just wants to be yours,’ he had said, stopping to take another look at the ring she un-rightly wore. ‘So, that is where we are at. Not where I want to be. I’m going to go back to London, enjoy having the house to myself for a few days … I’ll separate your stuff from mine and have Patel, Ellie, someone else bring it by whenever they get back.’

‘That is it?’ Effie had demanded.

‘That is it,’ Percy confirmed. ‘Enjoy your Easter.’

‘You know!’ she proceeded to shout. ‘This isn’t just us – this isn’t about me, or John or whatever preposterous notion you have of me and John – you could have tried, too! You could have -’

‘I did,’ Percy answered sharply.

‘He did,’ John offered in his brother’s defence. ‘I … I don’t exactly know why I never kept our Skype
dates, why I never called in on you when in Britain for business, why I … you know -'

‘I do,’ the larger man interrupted. ‘According to my father I’m guilty of the same. You had an idea of me, rather of what having a bother would be like and I guess I just … I mean, where do these concepts even come from, anyway?’ he snorted, shifting the toe of his boot around the gravel of the carpark, rubbing his temples before he moved to correct the small mess he had made by the same motion. ‘Ban was so excited about seeing his siblings at the weekend,’ Percy continued, ‘but I … in thinking about it, he has seen half of them within the last month in court – I think they are all involved in five separate, open suits against each other at the moment, and Ells, she - well nobles have an agreement not to sue anyone which she is still compelled to honour and uphold - but that really just means the methods House Hewlett employs in sorting sibling conflicts is a tad bit more medieval. But that is brothers and sisters, ‘innit?’ he laughed ironically. ‘I think it’s just one of those realities one would have just had to grow up with to accept as normal, accept at all.

‘I don’t know when exactly I stopped caring about you and your constant rejection, John, but you’re right, it has nothing to do with Effie. It is you, and me, and coming to terms with the fact that this whole animosity between us is hallow. After two days together I’m glad I didn’t grow up with riches but extreme restrictions, as you’ve indicated you’re glad you didn’t grow up the adoptive disappointment of loving parents who could have never otherwise hoped to have a family because of the things they do to daughters in certain religious sects … who, who never really had a fucking kid because I somehow got it into my head that I was someone else’s son,’ he chastised his past-self, ‘but I’m not. And I’m not your brother, and you’re not mine. That is it.’

And, for the rest of the night, it was.

Percy presumably drove back to London. Effie had cried in her aunt’s room until she fell asleep, prompting Margaret to come down to join him and Samuel at the bar for a stiff drink. Still stuck in Percy’s monologue, John had not paid much attention to what was said between the people who had raised him, finished his Gin and Tonic as quickly as he could and made excuses to retire.

When he awoke the next morning, he had done so with more purpose and direction than he had found in quite some time. He would thank Samuel and Margaret for all they had done for him in his youth, invite them to Christmas with him, Mary and the girls in New York and smile with his Godfather as the man’s wife sought out and found something at the breakfast bar that might serve to sharpen her steel tongue. After that, John reasoned he would hire a car and return to the Nantaba residence, apologise for his and his family’s behaviour, thank them for their hospitality - hopefully leaving on good terms. He would then drive Effie back to London where, he hoped – for her sake at least - something could be salvaged of her romance with Percy, that he in turn might yet find a friend in the man who would never be his brother.

Which was not to say that he needed a brother, or so decided as he fumbled for his phone on the nightstand, intending to text Ellie for her London address.

John thought about the home he had grown up in; he had something of a sister in Effie, he had cousins aplenty in Samuel’s nephews - all of whom he hated with more vitriol than he would accredit any of the children of the famously large families he had known in youth of truly hold towards one another, court cases and missing corpses aside.

He did not need a brother, and if it happened that Percy was not keen on the idea, he could just as well do without another friend, of which, he reasoned, he already enjoyed more than felt his fair share. John had the lads on his Sunday-league football team, the parents of the kids he coached in a lower division; he had Jordan, Anna (and the full of her staff at the tavern), Edmund (when they were both up for it, at least) and, here in Britain, he had the other Hewlett siblings whom he had
reason to individually count as close - Ellie and Eugene and Edna. He had Ban and John and Danny, he had Francis, George, Mary Anne, Patrick, Fabienne –

And Mary.

At home, he had Mary - his best friend, his partner in crime, the mother of his children, and maybe, in the event that she was both agreeable to it and Effie could force that blasted engagement ring he had bought the day before off of her seemingly fat little finger – his future wife.

He would get all of these things done - things he ought to have done years before without dramatic impetus - and then he would return to her and to wholeness.

At least, that was what he intended before reaching for his phone.

John never did end up texting Ellie for her London address for by eight in the morning, for too many of his other friends had already texted him a link to an article that demanded he return to the US post-haste.

John felt his throat tighten as he thought about Mary reading that he had gone to England to propose marriage to his ex in some other (lesser) tabloid. He felt he might be ill again when the image of her reading the article on several competing gossip sites upset her enough that she felt she had to step outside afterwards for a smoke, hoping to clear her thoughts, only to then be confronted and attacked by sleezy reporters who had known exactly where to find her –

- exactly where it would never have occurred to John to so much as look.

Effie was still talking away when he turned his hearing aid back on.

“Do you think its true?” he interrupted.

“Hold on,” she answered, but, as he quickly realised, not him. “No – John’s been doing this thing for the past half hour or so where he’s had his aid switched off thinking I wouldn’t notice, and now that he wants something – yeah. Yeah, no I can imagine that being a recurring problem. Yeah. John?” she addressed him. “Edmund says hi.”

“Edmund Hewlett?” he squinted. “When has he ever said ‘hi’? He is the sort who needs small remainders to be social and by the sounds of it, he’s been calling me a nob so you can tell him to sod off -”

“Yeah. He sends his love,” Effie said into the receiver. “Listen, I’ll ring you back.”

“What business do you have with Hewlett?” John asked after she had said goodbyes against Edmund’s awkward protests - begging her not to call back.

“I had the same question that you just asked yourself. But now,” she said slowly as she opened her email, readying to write the Mail’s online editor, “It seems I have a fair few more. Say … John, when we were all teenagers,” Effie shifted in her seat, composing a clever headline in the subject field, “did Emma’s horse Bucephalus kick a Polish petty criminal into a coma after you and Eddie and Ells had spooked the thing?”
“Not exactly,” John responded stiffly, his long fingers tapping irrationally against the steering wheel once more.

“Not exactly?” Effie pried, smiling at her own written wordplay. She had expected she would get this reaction from him. To look at the speedometer, it was a necessity of sorts. John was too anxious, too angry and too upset to be behind the wheel and had been for some time. Effie had indeed obtained answers around Mary Woodhull’s living-situation, but it would be to no one’s service were she to disclose her discovery whilst he remained on the motorway. If she simply told him to pull over again, at best, he would ignore her, at worst, he would grow as unconscious of the pressure he placed on the pedal as he had always been on his fingers when otherwise tense.

“He wasn’t Emma’s horse at the time,” John answered in a stiff yet squeaking tone.

Effie inhaled, extra cautious of her phrasing and pace. She spoke lightly, concealing her various concerns with a laughable criticism she knew John to share, “No. Emma isn’t inventive enough to come up with an idiom of her own and as such all of her animals are all named after the prophesies written on fortune cookies. She has a Shetland pony up there called 49-8-52-21-16-34 because she read the wrong side, the one with the lotto numbers, you know? If she’d made the same error with one of her racing stallions, I’d actually put money on Ban betting those same numbers each week. But I digress … *Bucephalus* is defiantly a Hewlett-name. So, might the beast have better been called *Incitatus*? Ellie try to use him as wartime-consul?"

“Where is this coming from?” John asked, a shade paler.

“Ride or die,” Effie read the words she envisioned fully capitalised in bold-face as she broke into a triumphant laugh. “Ellie Hewlett thrown from infamous murder-horse. Can you drive me to the Tarletons’ country estate? This is the kind of human-interest crap people look for and forward to on holiday weekends.”

John merely blinked. “Is she alright?” he frowned as he began to poke at the inbuilt GPS, searching for the charity hosed and headquartered on location by name. The screen, Effie noticed, retained all the while its panicked – slightly pedantic – shade of red. John was driving seventy-one miles-per-hour. The speed limit was posted at seventy. She began to share his frustration, letting it out in a sigh.

“Can you drive me up there? I can find out.”

“I *could* if the bloody navigation -”

“John,” Effie shook her head, “just pull over. I know the way.”

Finally, he did.

He handed her the keys with a sigh and moved to open the car door after another vehicle had just speed past, but Effie bid him to stay seated. “Emma … Ellie, they’re not,” she stammered, swallowed, tried to collect herself as she prepared to give him the news. “I called Edmund with the same question you posed to me,” she restated. “I just didn’t want you driving. I don’t … really need to be behind the wheel either. We just … we should talk.”

“So … so it is true,” John took a deep breath, buried his hands in his too-long auburn locks, covering his eyes as he stated the facts as he saw them. “Mary and the girls have been staying with Abe – with,” he stumbled as his volume and octane rose, “with Abe *fucking* Woodhull – her ex-husband, the man who -”

“John,” Effie tried to caution.
“And Edmund knew?” he emphasised, enough that Effie too felt betrayal’s sting before demanding further, “How long? How could he keep something like that from me? The fucking coward, he could he not -.”

“He didn’t,” Effie broke in, amending slightly, “Well, he did, but for no more than a few minutes, it is still morning state-side and, well, Edmund had a difficult night.” John looked at her as though to ask what could prove more difficult than discovering in the morning paper that one’s partner had been shacking up with her ex for the better part of the past year – had gone through such efforts to hide it that she had been in the regular practice of transporting wash and waste to another apartment to make it look lived-in as not to arouse his suspicions – suspicions, Effie saw, that John would have never himself had. As though she meant to prove the papers right, Mary had turned her phone off. In the morning, Effie had done her best to assure him that his partner was probably still asleep with her phone on silent as not to wake the babies. Now, she questioned if she too had betrayed his trust by acting on her own best intentions. John, she knew, did not care half as much for delicacy as he did for simple honesty. Effie swallowed. She was a journalist; she could stick to the facts, surely, without sensationalising them as had become the standard practice of the paper she ran long before it had become an industry standard.

“Anna’s mum was supposed to take the boy but she had separation anxiety and to, well I think to avoid a conversation around it she dug up a whole mess of family mishaps – her brother is apparently dating a Republican, it is something of a catastrophe for Senator Smith – but when it did not seem to bother Edmund to any extent – and why would it?” she began to digress. “He won’t be able to vote by virtue of his status unless seated in Lords, and even then, it won’t really matter -”

“Effie, what did he say?” John interrupted.

“So, you know how Ban and Abe have this crossword-based-bromance going?” she tried. “Sometimes the talk goes beyond definitions and directions and gets personal, just really, really personal – well, it is like this, Ban … never really left the armed forces by way of how he evaluates what he sees in front of him -”

“If this ends with another dead child -” John started, straightening his spine.

“It does and it doesn’t. I mean it doesn’t,” Effie stressed, “but – Ban, well, he noticed that the there were more tampons in the bathroom than he had anticipated in his half-conscious inventory. With everything going with Mary and Thomas -”

“Mary and Thomas?”

“Sorry,” Effie adjusted, “Mary and Thomas Robinson and Ban’s somewhat exaggerated paranoia around their trying to retake primary custody of Marie - it has been a scenario he’s been preparing a defence for months – no doubt making that poor girl’s life hell as is – anyway, you know him, how he gets with his girls … and just given everything that happened to Marie’s friend Susan with the boys at their school not that long ago, he worried that she was … well, late and that if there was any … easily explainable ground -”

“He thought she might be pregnant and that it would reflect poorly upon him if her living arrangement were taken to court,” John summarised, shaking his head. “Christ he’s – for someone who can process so much detail, it is such a shame – if he could only focus his attention away from hypotheticals … Marie is, she is not that sort of kid. I coach kids around her age and Ban has it so much easier than he will ever realise. The lass knows who she is and what she wants in life, she just has yet to figure out how to factor boys into her end game, yet to figure out that she doesn’t have to. With most kids it is the opposite – they know, or think they know, what they want in someone else ages before understanding themselves. It is why teen love doesn’t last.”
Effie wanted to know at what point John had ceased speaking of Marie and the kids he spent his Tuesday and Thursday nights teaching how to kick a ball back and forth and had begun to evaluate their shared past. Her ring finger hurt from the rock she should not be wearing. It ached all the more from her repeated attempts to remove it. She stared at her hand. It was a cliché, but one too costly to be considered a metaphor – something Effie had always considered as cheap as the fifty-pence novellas that employed them to no end. She suddenly wanted, needed to talk about young love in specifics rather than conceptuals.

But John wanted to talk about Mary.

And Effie realised in his nervous, eager and all together too-fixed gaze that she could not bring herself to speak that fool of a woman’s name.

She wanted to talk about them. About what had been. About what was. She wanted to know when and why John had decided to say to himself ‘that is it’ as Percy had said aloud and what, if anything, she might have done to make him stay.

But John wanted to talk about Mary and as she recognised the sound of his fingertips tapping lightly against his thighs as that which kept them from a promised silence which she sought to cool her more chaotic thoughts, she continued the narrative she had begun - too slowly, too detailed, and intentionally putting too much focus on secondary characters, that he might forget the woman who forgot him when he was not around. He deserved better, Effie told herself. He deserved someone who would share as much of her life with him as this Mary of his seemed willing to conceal.

“A few weeks back when Ban was having a panic attack over this whole hypothetical, as you put it, Ellie told him to calm down, saying she was a few days behind. In hearing this, Ban shifted to his other waking nightmare, immediately began accusing her of skipping meals, so Ellie she sent him to sleep on the couch and by the time he woke up, she had already left London for Liverpool. When she came back a few days later, she was complaining of stomach cramps. Okay. Sorted. But then, a few days ago – I’m really not sure why – Abe Woodhull, to whom Ban had explained his whole layered dilemma of living with multiple women, went relayed all of this to Mary – your Mary,” she said, swallowing a pain she could not quite place, “and Mary, who had an entirely different interpretation, called Anna asking if Ellie had been pregnant … because I mean, my guess is that they are about to have that Abortion Referendum in Ireland and it has been in the news cycle on and off about how many women take the ferry to Liverpool seeking such services. And that is where Ellie went. Where she owns multiple homes and headquarters multiple operations,” Effie shook her head in disgust at how easily American news agencies must find the task of misinforming their intended audiences.

“It is such a pack of nonsense,” she continued briskly, ”but at least with Anna. I can sort of understand the immediate motivation. Not wanting to talk about her own baby-issues, she strategically asked Edmund if his little sister was okay, so he rang her up in a panic – and this was like, in the middle of the night in the US – and then, well, then Ellie and Ban broke up. Well, I mean,” she considered as John’s eyes grew round, “they probably won’t make it public. The two profit too much politically from their union to call it quits over something as pedestrian love-loss when they can otherwise move past partisanism.

“At the Tarleton residence, there was a fight at breakfast - as would be expected with that many egos under the same roof,” Effie slighted, “and Emma – passive aggressive as ever – then gave Ellie a horse for the fox hunt which she apparently, according to what Edmund was saying, had reason to suspect she wouldn’t be able to ride – and it threw her – and,” Effie stopped abruptly, realising how different it sounded when she herself said as much aloud. “Shit … poor Ellie, she might be seriously hurt! She might even be heartbroken! God, what the fuck is wrong with me?” she exclaimed. “Here I
am having something of a laugh about one of the Hewletts not being a celebrated equestrian when -”

“Effie -” John broke in, reaching for her hand.

“Sorry. Mary, I know,” Effie tried to collect herself from chaos as she felt the warmth of his palm – softer, fatter and far less calloused than it had been when last she had enjoyed his caress – as it engulfed her always-frigid fingers and the ring worn on one of them.

“No … just, give yourself a break, yea?” he tried, moving somewhat awkwardly to suppress a stray curl. It might have come as a comfort if he had not remained so close, if he did not so resemble the man who had broken things off with her the evening prior, if he did not so resemble the boy she had loved throughout her youth, who she lost through circumstances outside of influence or control. But John could never back up, same as he could never back down. He gave her a half-smile meant to reassure and Effie felt as though he might forget the rest of the world, so long as their eyes remained locked.

“If she was hurt,” he said of Ellie, “she would have gone to hospital and someone would have called you and we would be there now trying to get her to share whatever new, unfinished manuscript Mary Anne emailed her after she’d read her way through all of the trashy romance novels available for purchase in the hospital kiosk, and, eventually she would relent if only that we might all play that uncomfortable game of trying to guess who among your friend group inspired which of Henry VIII’s wives. It is fine. She is fine, you can laugh. You should laugh after the weekend we’ve had.”

Effie realised she was paralysed in his gaze. “No. No I … I shouldn’t hit send on this. I shouldn’t be here with you. I should be, here, actually get out, let me drive,” she said, meaning it, but not so much that she could make herself move. “I want to go check on Ells. I don’t want to fly back to London. And you need to fly back home … though, so you know, even though things didn’t work out with Percy … with me, back when – you’ll always have one here. A home.”

“Effie -”

“Look, with Mary … Edmund was really upset with her and Anna starting rumours, staring fights – I don’t know if he ever told you this but Ban had a vasectomy a few years back, so he can’t actually have kids, meaning is Ellie was -”

“Jesus.”

“Nothing happened. I know Ellie better than I hazard most people do – trust me, nothing happened outside of her vows and if it had she probably would have kept it, I don’t really know that she would even have a choice giving the nature of her family and the one she married into. But, yeah … with them, I think this is a tip of an iceberg, I don’t know what he said but she is calling it off; Edmund, in an effort to make Ellie stop because you know just how she gets hyper fixated on any excuse towards decimation -”

“I truly don’t need to be reminded,” John was quick to agree.

“But maybe Ban does,” Effie sighed. “Just saying. But yeah, so now Edmund is fighting with Anna, and when I called him, as he was relaying all of this, I could overhear Anna talking about Mary to the … French one with a name like a Scottish municipality? Dumfries? Greenock? Doesn’t matter. They were talking about how Mary completely messed up her own life by hiding her living situation from you, so … obviously I began to inquire as to what I was overhearing, Edmund begged me not to meddle, other yellow papers were already too involved as it was – can you believe! What nerve,” she began to rant, “The Daily Mail is an English institution, its most read publication, most trusted news source – I’m away from my desk for a few days and suddenly we are being rated against The
Mirror and Sun?”

“Effie, I’m sure he didn’t … Oyster doesn’t think before he speaks. Sometimes he thinks as he
speaks which creates problems in his diction,” he trailed off. Oh. Effie understood. John did not want
to talk about Mary anymore, either.

“And,” he nearly continued his train of thought.

“And?” Effie repeated to a blank but unblinking stare. “And … then I asked him point blank if it was
true what was being said about Mary and Abe Woodhull in rival publications and he told me
‘Evidently!’ and then you decided to take an active role in the conversation.”

“I never really have, have I? Taken an active role in my own life … Effie,” he shifted after a long
pause, “if I had stayed, if I wasn’t going through what I was going through when we lost the baby, if
I had stayed, do you think …”

“Sometimes,” she admitted.

“Should I stay?” he asked. “In England?”

“I don’t think you should,” she answered.

John, however, had never quite trusted his ears and Effie realised too late she had learned in a little
too close. The heat of his body brought forward old impulses and she found her tongue fighting to
part his lips and his long, nervous fingers loosened the tie in her hair as he pulled her closer and
closer still.

>> Real men wear pinks :) << Ellie typed into the family group chat where she had spent most of
the day with her own bickering siblings. She snapped a picture of the husband she didn’t bother
greeting and sent it to her brothers and sister, half hoping that Edmund in particular would share the
picture with his American wife to an overblown reaction, the kind of which Anna seemed to thrive
on delivering, at least as of late. ‘That is barbaric!’ she could all but hear the woman scream at the
sight of the trophy with which Ban had returned. Five minutes of research would inform her that the
sport itself was illegal and Ellie expected her phone would ring, expecting to be saved by the value
signalling to which people raised without tradition were predisposed. It was not fair that she herself
should be made to fight so many battles over the span of a weekend designated as a holiday, that her
husband should seek to so humiliate her after all she had done to settle strife. Soon, he would have a
fight if he so longed for one, and Ellie, happy to name as her champion in what was sure to prove a
drawn out debate the woman to have contributed to the disintegration of her happy marriage that
same morning. She hoped for a Stalingrad, faked a smile, faked a yawn.

“You won then?” she asked when Ban, free of his pinks - the red coloured hunting jacket that would
have been so suiting on him were if not for the cold flush of his cheeks, sat down beside her on the
edge of the bed, handing her a fox’s severed tail which she proceeded to pet, watching him remove
his high tan top boots to an awful scent.

“Let me see,” he responded, adding, “I should have stayed, taken you to hospital,” when she did not
move from her pillow to let him examine the bruising on her back. Emma had awoken angry about
the night before and for Ellie’s role in reuniting Izzie and her lover. In an expression of her passive-
aggressive bitterness over having been proven wrong (as she often was when it came to judging character), Emma had given her Edmund’s old horse for the day’s hunt, an animal that proved difficult to ride and, for Ellie specifically, altogether impossible. She had been tossed hard half a field from the stables, prompting Ban to take the reins of the startled animal, promising the break the beast in an admission of fear he doubtlessly mistook for chivalry.

Her husband could not bear hospitals and - even if it had happened that she had truly needed to go - he would have found a feasible exemption from accompanying her to the emergency room that ignored the fact that he could not handle death as was evident from his unconscious physical repulsion meeting Mary the night before, even as she delivered what Ellie had expected him to meet as the happiest of news.

“Come on,” Ban encouraged. “Let’s see it then.”

Ellie leaned forward and could feel his grimace like sudden goosepimples on her skin. “You know I bruise easily,” she said. “My siblings and I all do, it is genetic, there is nothing to be done for it. Marie found a tube of … something, a paste with aspirin to combat inflammation. It is on the nightstand. She thinks it will help.”

“No, I – I’ll apply some again before bed,” Ellie interrupted curtly, wishing her phone to ring and remove his attention from the injury and whatever emotion he felt compelled to in his precise but inexpert and thus fully unhelpful examination.

“Can we not,” he started sharply, shifting to the tone that had taken him the night before. “Christ Ellie, you’ve made your point. You are pissed off within your right over my having voiced a concern to Abe that I didn’t expect to go further than that telephone call. But can you just … just today - what with Mary downstairs – can you maybe not extend yourself in this effort towards making me feel bad about my concerns over your health and safety?” he pleaded. “I know – I know I can be intense to the point of it seeming insensitive and for that I truly am sorry, but try to see this from my point of view, o’rite? My partner of more than a decade is dying of a reluctance to undergo further medical care. She can explain and justify it however she wishes but I can’t even begin to comprehend her selfish choice with Marie being at the age she is at, knowing – seeing that she needs her mum more than ever, especially as you refuse – no. You know what the most infuriating thing in this is? You are the same – you and Mary and Marie. You can be so calculating, but your cruelty insofar as I’ve been confronted with it personally, is in your inability or blatant unwillingness to understand how your choices around things that, granted, no one else has any right to control can cut so deeply.

“You, personally, are and have been for quite some time taking efforts towards nourishment, and I’m proud of you – really, really, I am – but trust … it is an adjustment. You can’t expect me not to worry – I spent half of my youth in want of slumber, kept awake by the question of how to convince you, then Eugene and everyone else your example influenced to bloody eat something before the damage was irreparable – and its been suggested, at least in my case, that this damage truly was. You know what really pisses me off about those strategy games Marie and her friends all like to play?” he asked rhetorically. “They completely ignore the logistical element – how do you feed an army? Supply chains are the question that defines all of human history. I’ve fucked up before, miscalculated and found my men in a desert without water and myself in the same panic that always kept me awake at night and perhaps always will. And I swear Ellie, I swear on my own life that sometimes it is just impossible – not matter what mechanisms you have in place, how through your planning, there are just some things that avoid anticipation and it is the worst thing in the world to watch their effects unfold before your own eyes.”
Ellie felt her heart sink at his explanation, at its vagueness, at the vivid imagery that must still consume his active mind.

“But at least … at least over there, there is a construct for it,” Ban continued. “At home … I know I’m not the best husband, that I neglect your needs to focus on others and I have no idea how to fix that now, especially given that you want to place blame in the areas that my care can’t help but to manifest. But my ex is dying of her own accord and I’ve the interest of my daughter to look after and what had really ought to have been the happiest day of my life, yesterday, when Mary told me she decided to allow the adoption to proceed was blackened by seeing her so ill, so … thin that – how could it just be on the basis of joy that I was weeping? I spent half of my life with this woman, and yes – of course I love her as you accuse, but not in … half my life, and half of hers, and that she would abandon all that is left of it out of some notion of dying on her own terms – does anyone? Really, does anyone get to choose how they meet Death? But I can’t have this conversation with her any easier than I can express my love for you without inducing resentment. And in the end, why should I constantly be villainised by all those who have ever vowed to love me in one fashion or another for the manner in which my concern manifests?”

“Ban, I -”

“Please Ellie, I know your angry, I know that I’m not entirely undeserving of your ire, but please, my love, can you contain your vitriol for just a while longer? I understand that you want to leave me and I understand that there are a myriad of reasons that extend beyond my given reactions to death as an abstract, and I can’t fault you, but can you extend me the same favour, at least and even especially when it comes to my worries about your health and wellbeing? I can’t help it. You were my first real friend; how can I not care?”

Ellie had not anticipated such an outburst. As per usual, she struggled for words.

“Death isn’t an abstract, it is an absolute,” she answered, leaning forward and rubbing gently at her husband’s back which rose and fell with his heavy breathing.

“What?” he asked. She moved to sit beside him. He did not meet her gaze.

“We are comfortable with it – you and I more than most – but we, taken as the entire body of humanity, death is something of a preoccupation, consider alone how eager we are to confront ourselves with the subject, in fiction, in statistics, in the eyes of others where so often we would rather not see,” Ellie answered. “But dying? That we all want to avoid. Everyone hopes that when Death comes, he doesn’t linger, ideally, that they will be asleep, unaware. Everyone wants to grow old but no one wants to grow ill. Think alone on the way language frames it – we speak of love being undying rather than undead, for the process is so much more devastating than the result and for the scope of some emotions, simple superlatives won’t do. I don’t know that you are conscious of this, but sometimes when you speak of war, you’ll note with something akin to gratitude that a shot you saw take a superior or subordinate was quick and clean, that the man or woman in question was not made to suffer – that you, in turn, did not share this fate through an unroutable empathy, worse in in the pain it can inflict than any external enemy could ever threaten or prove.”

“I’m sure you are right,” Ban consented without seeming to have heard. Then, Ellie knew herself to have no particular talent in oration or expression of any kind.

“Have you read Mary’s up-and-coming?” she tried, looking for someone who might have better phrased the same sentiment.

“I can’t bring myself to,” Ban admitted of his advanced copy. “I tried.”
“You should, I think poetry far superior to prose in addressing such matters, and naturally Mary Robinson -”

“I will, someday and with some distance I can’t yet define,” he interrupted without any intonation. “Maybe I’ll wish I’d opened the advance sooner if it then helps me in some way, but honestly? How long did it take you to open the letters I sent?”

“That is a ridiculous notion, that we have any censor of our own immediate thoughts, that something you may read one day exists now, here, before you are ready to encounter it, even if it has already been put to press. But it is my problem … I’ve never been quite so articulate as others have wanted me to be. *Wanted,*” she mused, “not *needed.* You once wrote to me that my unwillingness to interact meant that I wouldn’t pass judgement, that I’d have the patience as you struggled with your left hand and all of these other, smaller things you felt wrong in ascribing to either of us but felt you needed to for how else could we exist for one another? Are we so different now?*” she wondered. “I fought the war in my own way, and often in your interests, knowing that you would never be safe if you knew, knowing that remains the case – for what can be said that would not threaten or engage you in some way outside of any intent?

“I love you, I love you more deeply than I’ve ever be able to express by conventional means,” she admitted. “Ban Tarleton, you are the epitome of all that might be desired – it is almost impossible to tell you how very handsome you are for you are so conceited and cocky and outwardly confident that any attempt to put your physical beauty to words would be both in vain and in folly … but, but all that taken and also to your imminent credit, what might otherwise prove a fatal character flaw stops at the superficial. You have no idea how intelligent you are and therefore no obvious pretentions around it, you always take me – everyone - by surprise, and not alone on the merits of your memory, attention to detail or the scope of your knowledge or how it is employed but how you can laugh, genuinely laugh while offering a running critique. You actively seek conflict and - my God! – how brave you are in all things. Brave and unbearably strong. We are, all of us, confronted by death, we court it even, but you? You’ve had to contend with dying for most of your life and still you can smile. And you think I would leave you? You think I could if I should try?”

He gazed at her as though she were inwardly as lovely as her life’s circumstance forced her to look in the limelight, his lower lip trembling with an unstated truth that seemed to have dealt him a horrible blow.

“No,” she stopped in realisation, “Not insofar as I haven’t already. As complicated and cruel as the world can be, as much as I would wish our main source of conflict came from some external source, that is simply not and will never be the case. You crave attention and I can’t bear that being at my expense. Because of the nature of my work, be it what is publicised or the awful realities that fund it, you understand – you must – that I can’t afford to be so open as you would like. I have such a small sphere of privacy that what is my own I’ve learned to guard, even from those I love more than my words could ever lend if they mean to abuse me of them for them has to be a line. For Marie, you are the first to draw it,” she said accusingly, asking for the same consideration by way of an almost-compliment, “you ask the press to respect her privacy and they by and large comply as she in under eighteen, and as over-protective as some are keen to call you, you respect your daughter’s judgement enough to defer to it, to let it develop on its own over whatever internal objections you know to be irrational. You could have just as well left Arthur in jail last night, let his mum deal with his broken wires and swollen lip, but you cleaned everything up that things might continue as normal. -”

Ban reached out to her, stroking her cheek lightly with his single thumb. “You cleaned everything up. I just openly laughed at him. Ells, I don’t know how we came to this; I’m so sorry, I -”

“Could have been more understanding,” Ellie answered of herself. She looked down at her trophy.
“And, how did little Atty do on the hunt?” she asked after they spent some time in a silence that came with a kind of comfort.

“And, how did little Atty do on the hunt?” she asked after they spent some time in a silence that came with a kind of comfort.

“Anne is a skilled rider, I didn’t see her son much as he was mostly in my rear – focused as I was at breaking Bucephalus as much as I might while beating Emma in our two-way race – which no, I didn’t. She is a professional equestrian and I’m merely an enthusiast, outside of which I’ve not had time to ride in ages and of late I’ve been doing more weight than cardio – I’m heavier than I might like to be. Still, I have my trophy. Well, you have my trophy, I had the honour of presenting you with it.”

“The head would have freaked me out to be honest,” Ellie offered.

“I’m sure,” he chuckled.

“I’m serious,” she defended, shoving him with a pillow, “all of those tiny teeth.”

“It can’t bite you anymore, you know,” he responded, lightly pushing back.

“It is more of a visual thing. Did the girls do alright with it?” Ellie asked of her young nieces.

“They we fascinated, even did well with the bleeding, Rhys and Imogen and Price Farid, too. Arthur’s main objection to the tradition seemed born from the fact that Billy had already had already been on a hunt and thus wasn’t subjected to being so smeared. He made a face and Anne scolded him to try to be less obviously asocial, it was all I could do to conceal my laughter. Her reactions alone to his behaviour in the more general sense were more damning than anything I might have contrived. To Clayton’s girls, each took a foot as a reward but decided to throw them back to the hounds with the rest of the carcass as ‘they looked hungry’ and ‘had been running so hard and for so long’, ” he smiled. “Marisol would probably lose her shit if -”

“Nae,” Ellie snorted. “I gave Chiara a low dose amphetamine in such a bulk I think it might be intended for locker-or-boardroom use, or perhaps I’ve just landed on that assumption because thirty minutes after sampling the substance for herself she began shooting a ball at a tree and only stopped to give Mari a bump, and now they are both at it. Otherwise, things have been surprisingly quiet here, except -” she began, wanting to tell him of a conversation she had held with Marie in his absence but was interrupted by a ring tone signalling a number that only close friends and relatives knew.

“Do you want to get that?” Ban asked, Ellie doing her best to ignore it.

“No, and neither do you – it is Anna, probably. I sent Edmund a picture of you with the tail certain she would be on her high horse about it because I was cross with both of you over the insult you afforded my honour and integrity.” Ban reached for the ringing phone. Ellie put her hand on top of his to stop it. “No, if you are going to have a fight, it is going to be with me.”

“That is what marriage means.”

“No, Ban. It means trust, at least it should. I understand why you needed to talk and why you felt as though you could not speak to me – as I was telling Marie earlier, I’m no stranger to my own idiosyncrasies much as I hate -”

“You talked to Marie?” he asked, astonished and with a hope that expanded her sense of guilt over a lack of earlier action. The girl had elected to spend the afternoon with her mother and Mary’s new-old husband rather than go on the hunt and had been the one to open the door to Jason when he had carried her back to the house. Both Robinson women had checked in on her and brought her tea
several times, as had Izzie and Charlotte, who had also stayed behind for reasons of health, as had Thomas and Jason who simply wanted to be with the women they adored, as had Chiara and Marisol out of a lack of interest in the hunt itself.

“Shortly,” Ellie answered, “she came up to give me the cream and as she was putting it on my back asked me if I wanted her to continue to live with us, with all of her teenage imaginings – asking if her presence made me sad that I don’t have children of my own, to which I answered that had I been lucky enough to have a little girl, I would have wanted one exactly like her for she is so precious to me,” she repeated herself, choking back tears as she had when first confronted with this accusation and her own response to it. “And then we cried together in a way I’m sure your brothers would describe as ‘girlish’ and I apologised for my willing distance, telling Marie that she and her mother are going through a lot and I didn’t want to seem to either party as though I were offering myself as an alternative – especially with the animosity that has existed between them for some time - for there is none. I had a host of absolutely marvellous women at the ready to fill that role for me but the void was always there and I always wished – I still wish that my mother had loved me, even if just a little. But Mary, she loves Marie more than anything else in this life and though I do as well, it is not my place. Not the way things have been between all of us of late.”

“Ellie -” he whispered, cupping her face in his hand.

She shook her head from the embrace, realising her cheeks were wet as she continued. “I’m sure you are familiar with that literary critique Solomon’s Judgement – that is, the Biblical ruling that the woman who didn’t pull was the real mother and this an attempt to spare her child from pain. No, a parent would do anything to protect their child, naturally the real mother yanked her child to her side – have you ever seen a mum on a platform or at a crosswalk? There is a discomfort to it but it belongs to human nature. I love your daughter dearly, but it is not mine to pull. Not now. I spoke with Thomas last night on the same theme, I think he sees that now, too, that if he cares he should release her, and while you were gone, I told Marie the same.”

“Do you want children?” Ban asked after a while. It was not the response she had expected.

“Does it matter?”

“Ellie, I got to experience a life you were long denied, which I know I deny you still. And I don’t want that. You would make such a spectacular mother and I think you deserve to be as happy as you make me, as I know I can’t make you, not … not in all the ways a husband should.”

“You make me happier than I thought I would ever be. Ban, what I said this morning was only in reaction to you again accusing me of having been with your closest friends as though I’d – I haven’t been with anyone else in all the time we’ve been together and painful though it might be to hear, John, Francis – what I did with them had nothing to do with you.”

“I know that. I also know,” he stopped, swallowed. “What you said as fair and I feel it, too. That is, you neither complain nor do I open myself enough to criticism but I know I can’t please you – I can’t enjoy sex. Not since the surgery. It hurts more than most anything else I’ve ever experienced and there is nothing physically wrong with me which means only – maybe it is that I can’t get fully hard. Maybe it is something worse. Any road, it has nothing to do with you, Ellie, I’m mad about you, I desire you more that I fear I’m able -”

“I thought -”

“No. No! How … Christ, you are the only person in this world who may have ever seen me as someone worthwhile, which, absent of our history, I’ll never understand -”
“But you are!” she retorted, “That is why it hurts so much when you … when I lead you to feel as though you can’t talk to me about your hang-ups, or my own. We’re not perfect, but I swear we could be.”

“You are. You are brave and brilliant and bloody gorgeous and never seem to seek credit for all that you give, for as you said to me once, who needs a crown when they wield sword and spectre? Maybe it is convenient or merely cowardly to place blame on outside factors as you say, but were that life did not so often prove such a hinderance to worship. That I could truly help you escape,” he choked, his eyes shifting downward to a place hers felt forced to follow.

“I had no idea,” Ellie answered that which again went unsaid. “Truly, I would have never -”

“No, you’ve really no idea of how terribly I want you, desire you sexually in ways I can’t create or sustain. How selfish I sometimes feel for that fact. I’ve thought about having it reversed, maybe it would help, maybe it would prove even more of a hinderance ... Ellie, I wish – you know, this talk of dying and death – there are days when you are the only thing on this earth that makes me feel alive and I wish I could share that with you. When Marie goes to Wales with her mum for the summer, let us, you and I go somewhere where no one knows our names or faces for that honeymoon we never got to have,” he seemed to dream. “I’ll take you dancing every night and we will spend the days making love until I find a means of meeting your satisfaction.”

It sounded lovely, but she had to decline. “We have to deal with reality first. Apologies for being so terribly practical but you had a vasectomy shortly after Banina was born, and your saying that since then sex has been a form of torture?” she asked with more anger than seemed befitting of her status. “My God it has been five years and you – I know I can be a petty tyrant, but you see, right? It is as though you are simply too proud to work out problems that involve you in any personal capacity. Forget everything I said your being brave and smart and handsome, because what you truly are, all you are is -”

“I love you when you are like this,” he laughed. “When there is no pause in your tirade -”

“Yea? Well prepare yourself, Friend, I’m about angry enough to switch to Scots and then you’ll really have a problem,” she said, shoving him onto his backside, struggling against his attempts to crawl up onto the bed, over her before submitting. She realised quickly that she was no match, that strength was more than just an expression of his soul as his touch grew soft, his fingertips tracing from her cheekbones to her cleavage as he continued to speak of fury and fine things between sweet kisses and beads of sweat that passed between them.

“We should fight more often,” she said, the stick of her own sex escaping to her upper thighs as his early-evening stubble tickled her cleavage, his tongue occupied with the pink of her nipple his single hand battled with black lace and flesh-coloured silk to further expose.

“Do you ever wish we wed when we were stupid-young and enslaved by our passions?” he whispered when their eyes met, still looking at her with all of the wonder of young love that had yet to be fully realised, with an eagerness not constrained by the rules governing the reality of a world extending beyond their rustled sheets.

Ellie rolled her eyes in response. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she answered him honestly.

“I think about it a lot. I never let you give me an answer, never gave you time to work it out for yourself.”

“I loved you long before I had a voice,” she cooed, feeling his cock stiffen at the sound. “All the same, my answer wouldn’t have been ‘yes’ were it not for who I watched you become.”
“Where my great blessing is that you’ve never changed.”

“Cosmetics being what they are,” she winked.

“You know I have to have the hottest arm candy.”

“Excuse me! Arm candy? I’m of noble birth, I have a Ph.D. in a traditionally male discipline, I’ve proven that as a private citizen I can start and end wars with a telephone call – I am no man’s prize, ‘Sir Banastre’. You see, this is why I find it so hard to compliment you, pretty boy,” Ellie laughed as she struggled for a decorative pillow what might yet be weaponised.

“Good,” he taunted as he moved to block her assault, “then go back to telling me all the ways I’ve failed to please you so I know where to try.”

“Do you still want to examine my backside?” she teased. He flipped her over without a second of hesitation and left a trail of kisses down her spine after removing her negligée, his fingers fighting with her knickers until he had found his way inside her warmth, learning forward to whisper into her ear that she should not be so selfish as to only share her screams with the pillow.

“I was here all day. You can hear nearly anything through these walls.”

“You think I care?”

“I think your sisters might.”

A knock came on the door as if on cue but the voice that followed it was neither Emma’s nor Izzie’s nor that of anyone else who might have come to call them down for supper-

“No,” Ellie moaned, closing her eyes. It was worse that she was able to either imagine or comprehend. She had so little alone time with the man to whom she had given her heart and so little of that was allowed for togetherness of the kind without built-up pain and projected blame. Life was enough of a reminder of her public role, how it bleed into her psyche and private life despite all precautions. She felt her husband’s full weight on her bruised back and he nibbled at her earlobe, wishing that she could be permitted this pressure before being forced to deal with the door. Some days, the world simply asked too much.

“Island, dancing, far away from everyone we know, everyone who knows us,” Ban continued to whisper as he felt her femininity. - “Ellie,” the woman whined from behind the door. “I know you are in there. I can hear you! Please, open up, I need your help.”

“You bloody don’t!” Ellie called back, crawling from her husbands embrace, turning to find him fully erect. “Let’s just do this,” he whispered. “Fuck it, it might work out this time. I haven’t been this hard in -”

“Touch yourself and think about all the things you want to do to me, I’ll get rid of her,” she replied, getting out of bed and thinking more of herself and how to keep up the rare enticement despite the rude interruption gathered a few items from her nightstand and the designer handbag open on it. “Just a minute!” she cried.

“Oh, Ellie! Oh, thank God – you won’t believe what I’ve been through -” Effie Gwillim exclaimed when she opened the door a crack, not having bothered with redressing herself.

“Are we off-record?” Ellie interrupted.

Effie blinked. “Yes, naturally we are. Ellie, I messed up, I did something -”
“Great, okay, look,” Ellie whispered, speaking quickly and with far too many words, knowing Effie was not the sort to just take a hint. “Because my husband and I are about to have halfway decent sex for the first time in a while – fingers crossed! - and giving that all I ever bloody do is look out for other people’s interests including yours, Miss, you’ll respect me now when I say that I need a few hours to myself. I’d invite you in but being that Ban is given to absurd envy surrounding every friend of his whose sheets I’ve ever shared.”

“I’ll make an exception!” he called out. He would not. That much she knew.

“Here,” she said, shoving her half-emptied Louis into her best friend’s hands.

“Jesus Christ that is a gun!” Effie exclaimed after a quick glance inside, her eyes exaggeratedly wide.

“With a silencer,” Ellie informed her curtly. “Plus, some anti-inflammatory gel, a tampon, around five-hundred quid in small, unmarked bills, and,” she stopped, suddenly taken by her friend’s uncharacteristically dishevelled appearance. “Ban, can you fetch your fancy conditioner for us? The one with a relaxer in it?”

“Tell her to use Charlotte’s. Her stuff is better.”

“Use Charlotte’s; her stuff is better,” Ellie repeated, continuing to speak with haste. “Any road, if your problem, whatever it may be, can’t be solved by one of those items, you are truly beyond any assistance I could offer. Wait,” she said, freeing her arms from her bra straps before twisting to remove it entirely. “It is a padded push-up. If it doesn’t fit, find someone to borrow a pair of socks from. We good? We’re good.”

“Ellie!” Effie whined.

“You’re welcome!” the blood princess smiled as she closed the door. “Now … where were we?” she asked her husband as she turned back to meet him, her exposed nipples hard in the evening air.

“That was marvellous,” Ban applauded.

Ellie smiled at the sight of him fully stripped and slid herself from her strappy thong before making her way back to the bed. “Oh, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Kid,” she winked.

Chapter End Notes

There was this song when I was small – we learned it in school and my whole football team used to sing: “Skip, skip, skip to the loo! Skip, skip, skip to the loo! Skip, skip, skip to the loo – skip to the loo, my Dar-ling!” And we all thought it was hilarious, assuming (of course) that it was about running to the WC.

Someone told me once what that song was actually about and not a week goes by without me trying desperately to recall the true meaning, but I suppose some things are just like that, you know you are wrong but the interpretation that you arrived at on your own is so imprinted in your underlying thought process that even when you know you’re off, correction is impossible. To illustrate further – it occurs to me that while IA
attempts at “family fluff”, its recurring themes are adoption, abortion politics, genital mutilation and tons and tons of policy referendums that I realise have since faded from the news cycle and require notes. But … I’m really tired, can I just … do it later? Maybe? We good? Cool.

I’ll be back within the next few days with The Talk™ because this is a family fluff kind of tale and no adolescent experience* is complete without the adults in one’s household scaring one for life. :) (*regardless of actual age.)

By the way, since there is no chance of either of you remembering this by the time I hit “post”, with Valentine’s Day coming up and me just being in the mood for a certain kind of kitsch, I’ve actually gone and written the first chapter of Hide and Sequel. It is called “The Peninsular War” and a large chunk of it is about Gibraltar vs Armenia, or, more specifically, Brexit temporarily breaking down because Spain wants a rock back … then there is a murder-suicide back in Britain and everything breaks down. Anyway, just in doing research for the work, it is crazy how often the Armenian NT has been used as a tool of soft diplomacy in the past decade. But this is a “love story” – I promise.

S---, I am doing it again, aren’t I? XD Right. Cheers. Bis bald.
An Arrest

Chapter Summary

Effie hears from a host of varied women how to write her own love story. Marie takes umbrage with an offhand comment intended in affection. Anna tries to fix things from afar. Ellie and Ban collude and conspire; John is arrested thanks to their antics and Percy is asked to work overtime.

Chapter Notes

You know how phones have auto-suggestions that make little sense? Okay mine came on a typo that needs to be standard correspondence (still, since old surnames have since been shortened into screen names) we are going to ignore grammar here and from now on and just say: “Guten Tav.” XP

(Na? Geht’s? Jo.)

…and that is all I’ve got. Cheers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Effie Gwillim came looking for a shoulder to cry on, she had arrived at the wrong address. The expression worn by the women gathered in Emma’s kitchen told that her recent trauma did not register as sin, if, in fact, it registered at all.

“I mean, she isn’t wrong,” Charlotte frowned, staring at the contents of the emergency kit Ellie had hastily thrown together. Effie’s eyes shifted to the gun where she guessed the others also looked, wondering who in her narrative they would see neutralized, wondering if between them they had a working familiarity with stories of the sort she had just finished telling. She could poison herself or step in front of a train, she might well stab her lover to his death and wait out patiently in a seaside resort for the state to lift the black flag of execution, but ladies, Effie frowned, even those who had fallen, never shot themselves. It was far too messy, too sudden, too simple for the female psyche playing muse to those literary masters whose works were mandatory world over in every classroom worthy of the distinction. But maybe no one here read her that way. Maybe being written off by her peers was the form penance took.

“Wait,” Emma countered, shaking her head before she turned to dig around one of the kitchen drawers, returning a minute later with a single pill in a silver wrapper. Effie breathed a sigh of relief, imagining herself ending a more romantic life, a life, all the same, which she had not found fulfilling of the promises she had found in books read in boarding school, suffering in agony as the arsenic took her with all of the fury and passion that failed her other experiences. Women never shot themselves. At least someone among her company could empathise with this critique.

“Plan B,” Emma (evidently not Bovary) explained with a shrug and a small wink meant to reassure. “Now you’re good to go.”
“Why I never!” Effie exclaimed rising from her slouch if not her seat. “Emma! That is entirely inappropriate – why do you even have … how could you even think -”

“That is a fair question, Ems,” he mother baited. “Why do you -”

“Because I want to have sex but I don’t want to chance consequence,” Emma moaned. “Because I don’t want to have a baby or some man around me using words like ‘future’ and ‘family’ or any other f-word to contradict the ‘fuck’ I’d rather hoped I had engaged in … calling it instead ‘making love’ or some variation where the predicate relies on its object. Mum – I’m glad that you and dad had a perfect, happy marriage, that the having a traditional family worked out for you but it isn’t remotely what I want for myself and if for a moment you could -”

“Emma relax,” Mrs Tarleton said sharply, brushing off her middle-child’s exaggerated theatrics with the same swooping gesture of her hand not already occupied with a half-drunk glass of Bordeaux. “I was merely asking why you keep it in the kitchen.”

“Because people like Effie go through medical cupboards,” Marie suggested when her aunt was not immediate in her response.

“Everyone goes through other people’s medical cupboards, darling,” Mary corrected, tapping her daughter on the tip of her nose as though to offer a light reprimand for entirely wrong reasons.

“I … really don’t,” Effie tried to defend.

Emma shrugged them all off. “This is my first aid kit, here, in this drawer,” she explained, holding up a few boxes of over-the-counter pain killers as evidence. “Why would I keep my pills in the lavatory when my water-purifier is built into the refrigerator?”

“Well it is nice to think of you caring about the status of at least something you allow into your body,” Charlotte quipped, glimpsing her sister with a quick side glance that transformed into a wry smile intended for everyone else.

“Do you bother faking an orgasm anymore being that you can’t feel your husband’s cock?” Emma returned angrily, her raised volume and vitriol causing Effie’s spine to straighten.

“Well, not with such theatrics,” Charlotte answered, gazing upward at the creaking ceiling.

They sat and stood around a massive island in the middle of Emma’s recently renovated kitchen using the inbuilt cutting board as a makeshift kitchen table, for the actual table by the window had been robbed of its four chairs. It was hardly the most comfortable setting for conversations of the heart, least of all for the fact that the lighting fixture above them shook with each thrust and the ceiling itself seemed to echo every moan. Emma had commented earlier in response to Effie’s expression that she had only stuck her brother and his wife in that room thinking the passion between them to be dead. A few of the other women (including Ban’s ex) then echoed her in agreeance that they were glad that it was not and Effie had been forced by what she took to be social convention to nod along with this assessment, however uncomfortably. There were, after all, few other options available, even in a stately home of this size. Most of the men were in the living room, engaged in a heated debate that sounded at risk of moving them from words to action, Izzie and Jason were playing a boardgame with a few of the family’s older children in the drawing room and the little ones were in the nursery with their respective nannies, building forts from sheets. The dinning halls were being dressed for Easter-brunch by members of staff and everywhere else was an office bed - or storeroom, leaving little space for broken hearts and precisely none for quiet contemplation.

Jane Tarleton gave her bickering daughters a look of bemusement but declined to comment on their
standing hostilities. It was no great secret that the two despised one another, Charlotte, the family favourite, ever outspoken yet strict to convention and Emma, more plain than she was pretty, who, despite having found her voice too late in life to win her any great affection, seemed to her sister to be leading an existence that might well warrant envy. Charlotte had been tapped at a young age for the national side and had attended an elite university in the United States where her tuition had been paid for in goals and glory until an injury in an international friendly had ended not only her sporting career but her ability to stand. When she spoke, the wheelchair was easy to ignore, but watching her around her sister, who, for her part, had made quite a name for herself in horseback riding, Effie could not help but wonder if everything that had happened to Charlotte since college – her marriage, her children, her successful career as in-house solicitor and the pride she otherwise took from these things was all consolation for an inter-sibling competition she would now never be able to win.

Emma enjoyed medals and titles and more personal freedom than it would occur to most in the family to aspire to. Aunt Margaret singled her out as her favourite Tarleton to the quite fury of her sisters and sisters-in-law (fashion victims, all) and as Emma laughed at her own mean joke, trilling and she twisted the win around in her glass, Effie could not help but to share the other’s sense of shame before the shameless. Upstairs, Ellie said something that defied the standard Margaret Spinkels had set for their entire generation and as though suddenly unwilling to be undone by Emma’s closer approximation to modern emancipation ideals, Chiara commented of Ellie with open criticism, “Who would honestly speak of love in the act? I think they are having a go at us.”

“How can you … talk about, about … with your mother-in-law present …” Effie blurted out in something of a squeak.

“How old are you, Effie? Thirty? How can you not say ‘sex’?” Mrs. Tarleton inquired.

“I’m twenty-nine,” she swallowed, unsure that she would ever reach an age where she could consider such as fodder for discussion.

When Effie Gwillim had been fourteen, she had ‘the talk’ with her aunt and had not been able to broach the subject since. She could barely verbalize what she wanted or felt when she was with a partner and certainly had no desire to open herself up to self-pretending feminists now. The summer after her aunt had shocked the world (or at least, the ones she travelled in) by wedding herself to John’s godfather and legal guardian, Admiral Samuel Graves, both Effie and her then-ex had awoken to the sorts of sounds no one would imagine had anything to do with love. They exchanged a few words over it before they were joined at breakfast by the newlyweds, a few too many for Effie’s taste even at the time, for she herself had ideas about loosing the virginity she then held tighter than her darkest secret to her One True Love in a canopy bed dressed in soft sheets of Egyptian cotton with an impossibly high thread count, pure, white, but covered in red rose petals and the scent of perfume. Around her, a hundred candles would be light as though to give the act an air of religious devotion, but most of the light would come from the stars that twinkled in the clear night sky, from the diamond ring she would wear on her finger, reflecting both light and love.

But John?

John had been happy to have Ellie Hewlett on the couch in the common room with a story about how her brother Edmund had short a horse, no doubt the both of them thinking of a blood-covered animal carcass as they shared in the same sin. The image that returned to her when John made snide comments about the sounds he had heard was nearly as horrible as the conversation that had followed, Margaret telling them both that women going through menopause had, owing to the hormonal change, more of a sex drive than even the most fanciful of teenagers and the sort of experience to render every encounter worthwhile. Effie asked to be excused. John wondered aloud if she was using marriage to guarantee what looks no longer could. ‘My skin may well be looser than it once was, but at least it isn’t covered in spots,’ Aunt Margaret had replied. ‘To tell you the truth,
John, I was nervous, moving with my beautiful, impressionable young niece to a home with a teenage boy, but with your cheeks and forehead looking as they do it seems my fears were unwarranted. There is no need for me to insist upon either of you sleeping with your doors open.

‘Could you maybe make sure you close yours?’ Effie tried. Since then, she had not said anything on the subject if it could in anyway be helped, and certainly not around women of an age where digression had long been forgotten.

“So, it is not that you imagine me a prude, it is that you are afraid that I’m not?” Mrs. Tarleton squinted when Effie had finished her hurried explanation. “My dear, sex is something natural, it is instinct and expression, its – wait a minute, aren’t you at The Daily Mail?”

“A lot of that is fiction,” Effie admitted in a whisper.

“It mostly is if it is quote-unquote ‘good’,“ Mary said before finishing he remainder of her wine in a single sip, only to have it refilled in the same moment by Marisol, looking to toast to that observation.

“I think … there is really a difference between reading about it and talking about it,” Effie swallowed.

“Jesus, the word truly fails your vocabulary, doesn’t it?” Charlotte wondered to a few giggles.

Emma, however, responded with a cynicism that came as an echo to everything her older sister said. “Oh, relax Effie, we don’t talk about sex with Mummy-Dearest. I can more than empathise with your woes. Parents are the worst – Ma, you remember the last time you tried to hook me up with someone? It has been months and I still have a fucking headache.”

“Well, for that you have aspirin and an American style refrigerator that dispenses clean water,” Mrs Tarleton quipped. “And I didn’t try to set you up, I simply told you that I had overheard that Jordan Pickford was going to be at a certain club. You were the one who decided to go.”

“You didn’t tell me he’d be spinning,” Emma smiled, absent of bliss. Before Effie could ask who exactly Jordan Pickford was, the Brazilin of their number let out a small shriek.

“Querido Deus!” Marisol gasped. “There is nothing in this world worse that a footballer who thinks he can put together a set.”

“I can get on board with it,” Chiara said. “Pickford, anyway.”

“It is uniformly awful,” Marisol objected to a general contentious.

Chiara shook her head. “Yea, I’m in my late forties … if I were at risk of having the sort of midlife crisis that involved electro, I think it would have happened by now. All of that music is awful as you put it – techno, house whatever. I don’t think it matters whose laptop is hooked up to the speakers. But then I’m not much into football, I don’t have enough emotional steak to allow my absent expectations to somehow be disappointed.”

“But you work in sport. You work for one of the biggest clubs in Europe -” Marie puzzled.

“Doing G and A,” her aunt answered. “It is like any other corporate job of the same level just with a deliberate motif in most of the art we’ve hanging in the hallways and shared spaces. It is tacky, I think. I know the Italian game is gaining in esteem in Britain but that has nothing to do with sport. It doesn’t even have anything to do with marketing. It is your politics. Brexit has turned your whole country towards cautious populism where in an attempt to appease everyone none of your leader say or seem to do anything definitive, so you look at Serie A and say ‘Oh! Strategy!’ if only because
such otherwise fails your collective existence – but it is boring! It is boring. The Americans can’t get behind football because they already have leaders lacking in charisma who manage to move the balls, as it were, and if you had a Cheney, a McConnell you wouldn’t need our clubs as a comparison,” she explained before shifting the conversation back to the broader audience. “Anyway, do any of you ladies take the office home to the point that it dictates your pastimes? No,” Chiara answered for them, expanding of herself, “I’ve no care for what Juve does off the pitch. As long as the team has a safe Champions League spot, my job isn’t much affected by what they do on field either. But I digress. As we otherwise speak of the sort of disappointment that can only come when a man gets involved, the thing I find funny in Emma’s Jordan Pickford trauma is what Mary Anne Burges chose to make of it after the fact.”

“It was like … premature mid-life-crisis mixed with late-nineties-anime soundtrack, the music, I mean,” Emma clarified, still trapped in what Effie was beginning to think of as being more of a PTSD-trigger than it had been date. “Trust me, your non-existent expectations would have been depressed.”

“Well, I stand corrected then,” the Italian heiress gave.

“Hence the Plan B?” Mary inquired of the sister-in-law she had never been at any real risk of having.

“I didn’t – oh my God!” Emma exclaimed, her face turning a shade paler. “I didn’t even stay. He didn’t see me. We never spoke. Alas, I daresay, we never shall.”

“Who is Jordan Pickford?” Effie asked at long last.

“He is Everton’s keeper,” Marie answered.

“Burges modelled her Phillip Augustus on him,” Chiara explained in terms she knew Effie could comprehend. “That is the only detail in this worthy of discussion.”

Effie, for her part, could only blink in confusion. “I always though Ellie was Jeanne,” she stated of her other best friend’s Plantagenet saga of kiosk-quality erotica.

“Jeanne might be a composite character,” Mrs. Tarleton offered.

“In the first book, maybe. I started hooking up with Mamet around the time she was penning the first sequel and I’ve been telling her about it in … recognisable detail ever since,” Emma gave. Her mother looked as though she was going to be ill in the sink.

“Wait, does that make me Eleanor of Aquitaine?”

“Do you talk about your sex life with Mary Anne?” Effie gaped, her hopes for higher morals and healthy, normal boundaries sorely disappointed by the question that had proceeded her own.

“Don’t you?” the old matriarch winked.

“What sex life?” Charlotte snorted. “Any road, Ma – why would that come as a surprise -” she began in mocking tones. Effie, too, suddenly wondered the same. Mathilda had been famously beautiful in her youth and still enjoyed the reputation for being cunning as she was cruel. She first saw the man who one day would become her husband at a stadium, and, either mistaking him by attire as someone who had such connections or twisting her hair and speaking so coquetishly she felt assured that it would not make a difference if he did or did not, asked if he could get her tickets to a sold-out concert, the black market for such events dominated in that era by a hooligan firm he looked as though he held some allegiance to. Regardless of how he managed, John Tarleton had gotten the five tickets that had been requested and a sixth for himself, only to have his efforts repaid in love of the
courtly kind — namely, Jane made an effort to ignore him all evening. Thereafter, any idea he had had of them was as good as forgotten until the two met on line at a bank (that it worked out his father owned), the business delayed by an armoured truck delivery and then taken to a tea shop on the same street, where, after what had been an engaging conversation, she asked him if he wanted to join her the following weekend in the VIP box at Goodison Park, which John politely declined, citing that he was running for local office and needed to speak to and be seen by as many people as could be managed. Aunt Margaret sneered many years and multiple children after the fact that her former-friend’s interest in the little upstart had been driven by the fact that she had let herself be manipulated by the fact that the soon- and long-thereafter Lord Mayor’s ambition extended anything she could offer. Effie, as a child, had wondered if this was fair. It all seemed rather romantic.

It still did.

The two, after all, have loved one another until Mr Tarleton’s last breath and his widow had never taken another lover in all of these years since. Effie had thought she might have found the same in Percy, a man she might not have given a second thought had she not met him outside of any setting where personal circumstance was allowed a role, a love that would last far longer than either of them. Then, she thought she had found the same in John. Effie refilled her own glass and returned to the conversation at hand, to a question she was happy was not addressed to her.

“That was a while ago, when that came out … have you ever thought about taking things further?” Mary inquired of Emma and (presumably) the engineering student all supposed Mary Anne to have loosely modelled her Saphadin on. If the boy was even half as endowed and enduring as his fictionalized counterpart, Effie, even with her all too recent experience of ‘further’ quickly becoming ‘too far’ could not help but wonder the same and leaned forward in her stool.

“Oh, that is rich coming from you. Remind me Mary, how long did you lead my brother on?” Emma spat. “No. I haven’t though about ‘taking things further’ because they are fine as they are. Leave costumes, crowns and the whole concept of courtly love to historical romance novels and women like Effie Gwillim. I’m doing just fine with twenty-first century sex.”

Effie did not know if she was meant to take offence or not.

“All love stories have clothes, crowns, and kitsch,” Marie smiled. “Mine will too, someday. I’m sure of it. Can’t say I think it will be worth the wait, but whatev. There are no men in London worth having.”

“Glad as I am for the soundtrack Ellie and Ban are providing, I think your mum and dad have the best love story in kind if the criteria are defined by a standard historical romance,” Marisol winked.

“How is that?” Mary squinted.

“Oh darling, you toppled a Kleptocracy together the moment you met!”

“I thought you guys met through my biological father at a time when Chelsea was at the height of their spending,” Marie seemed to puzzle. “I still wouldn’t say they have been toppled by recent austerity, I mean they still won the league the year before last -”

“Well, wherever the other half of your genes come from, you are defiantly my brother’s daughter. How anyone can take such a quick turn form whimsy to cold analysis I can’t otherwise explain,” Charlotte snorted in amusement.

“Give me a ring when you need placement for work-experience,” Chiara smiled.
“I … I would, really, but I want to make my driving licence in America next year under their relaxed age limit that I needn’t rely on lads like Arthur for rides,” Marie tried to excuse herself.

“And because their strategy occasionally results in offence,” her aunt nodded with some measure of approval.

“Sure?”

“I was talking about the WAGs,” Marisol clarified. “Marie, you are probably too young to remember, but for a long period football-wives had an undo, fully disproportionate influence on the entire sport and your hero-mother helped break that stronghold.” Marisol, for her part, likely had more legitimate reason than most to find fault with the era – she had herself played as a girl and had dreamed of a footballing career in America until rudimentary maths and measurement had gotten in the way of that dream. Tall, blonde and of an exceptional beauty, she had been turned down by various agencies as a teen told that she was a tad too muscular for anyone to find her alluring, and she needed a quicker route to easy cash than waiting for a scout.

Marisol’s parents were farmers, they had been hit by a drought the prior year and the coming harvest looked even less promising; realising that, even if scouted, it would be far more likely that she would not earn in large enough figures to support her family and their neighbours against the off-set of global climate change (then seen as a liberal conspiracy) she stopped playing, stopped eating and returned to the city six months later a slightly more emaciated size-zero than she had already been, more ‘Victoria’ than ‘David’, not terribly long thereafter more ‘Victoria’ than she would have ever considered it realistic to imagine, landing herself a spot on the world’s most famous runway and using her earnings to improve irrigation in the agrarian community she still called home.

It was on a visit back that she met her husband, sent out on a scouting mission from an Italian outfit that shopped abroad. ‘My prince has come, a year too late,’ she had joked with him against a fence of a field she couldn’t save, which now served the purpose of recreation. He introduced himself as Tarleton and during the dinner that followed between gushing to him about his sister Charlotte (then seen to be a rising star) she had told her story of ambition forgotten in pursuit of some impossible standard of beauty. It was there she had been introduced to the idea that in England, the tabloid reading public as far more preoccupied with what the wives and girlfriends of footballers were wearing than the league table itself, leading Marisol to feel incensed over the ends to which the objectification of women detracted from all that mattered and all that did not. Her runway career would be over before the effects of global warming reached enough of suburbia for it to be incorporated into a shared sense of reality; pastimes eventually recovered form the influence of those who had married into it, again, far too late for society to not carry the stigma of strap backs, spray tans and skinny being mistaken for substance where such concepts now failed sport.

Effie, for her part, missed the shalow late nineties early noughties, but noting that there might be little worst than falling into an argument with a self-righteous supermodel who may in fact be more intelligent (or at least more ‘woke’) than she herself, thought better on it, smiled at Mary and hoped she would bring at least some of her old style to addressing the accusation.

“Well, if you want to look at it that way … but it was not by design. Not by my design anyway. I’d followed the England squad to Germany hoping to win John Terry back; Ban, meanwhile was attempting to find someone in the FA he could convince to reverse a nation-wide stadium ban – lower case – and spent a few days stalking the team until he overheard something Terry said in a beer garden that served as a distraction, and bet the centre-back that he could have his way with me, which Terry, naturally took him up on, wanting to be done with the affair entirely,” she explained casually, as though such was common place. “So, not knowing this, I fell for his charms, and then - somewhere between becoming flushed with dispensable cash and getting into it with the Gladbach
faithful, an Albanian casino owner, Interpol, the Federal Minister of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and everyone else looking for that blasted goat that Simcoe and Rawdon stole and Hanger formed an emotional attachment to - I discovered the source of his new-found wealth and told him I never wanted to see him again.

“Then, sometime later, realising that he would never get his way from the powers that be and that his position was becoming untenable, he snuck the goat onto the WAG bus in Badan Baden in an attempt to punish as many as he could for his own juvenile delinquency. I was the first to return from the now-infamous shopping spree, having bought a single pair of heels not available in the England that I had been so desperate to have,” turning to her daughter and adding as an aside, “this was before internet commerce became common place.”

Effie watch Marie nod and wondered if the teen truly understood. Mary looked for a moment as though she shared the same doubt. A few faces fell into frowns, the comparative life experiences of a fifteen-year-old serving to show the years that had otherwise been creamed, filled, coloured, cut away by countless products and out-patient procedures. Marie, Effie smiled to herself, was probably only here because her father had taken away her mobile as part of her punishment. She was probably board beyond reason and probably thought herself too grown to hang out with her slightly younger cousins now that she had had her first kiss. Effie wondered if she was setting a poor example, her very presence saying to Marie that she might never get over it, that she might well be condemned to make similar mistakes half a lifetime later.

“Any road,” Mary continued. “I was almost as desperate for the Jimmys as I was in that self-same moment to leave the entire milieu to its own rot. Since I arrived in Germany, Cheryl had been trying to get me to invest in her bid to be the next WAG-Queen, as Victoria had announced prior to the tournament that she would be abdicating. As someone who was otherwise only famous for belonging to a girl-group, the future Mrs. Cole saw herself as Mrs. Beckham’s natural successor, but Victoria favoured Coleen for the metaphoric crown and Cheryl saw this as an extension of the club-over-country politics that consumed the national side to that era. I – for my part- could not have cared less for any of it, having seen the menetekel a bit before the media made an absolute circus of the Baden Baden affair to distract the British public from the Lion’s poor showing in the Cup.

‘Having had about as much as I could take of the petty in-fighting, shoes in hand, I returned to the bus, planning to enjoy the privacy with the last hundred pages or so of the book I was reading at the time when I was confronted by a bloody farm-animal. Startled, I turned to run and twisted my ankle – knowing very little about goats and having only this vague idea that they eat anything to dictate my response. I clutched the bag containing my new shoes to my chest in hopes of protecting them from the satanic beast who by then stood over me. I was paralysed by fear and it began to lick the tears from my face. I thought it certain that I would die, that it would devour me – and unable to run, unable to move, I shut my eyes and waited for the end to come. It didn’t. Coleen … McLoughlin back then if I recall correctly, it would be a few years before she and Wayne tied the knot, came and saved my life by shooing the thing away, proving that she would have made a lovely, goodly queen were kingdom come not upon us.

“I had to be taken to hospital to be treated for shock and by the time I came to, it was all the talk of the papers how English WAGs had stolen Cologne’s beloved goat-mascot for their own amusement, and had they not tipped press interest in the activities by spending millions on a shopping spree, Hennes – that was its name, or title, or something – might have never been recovered. And with that, the power wielded by the wives and girlfriends of footballs was broken and as a nation, we were all were forced to return to individual ambition. So,” she recounted on her fingers, “that is clothes, crows and kitsch – how did Ban ultimately factor in to make this a love-story?” Mary laughed. “He saw in The Mail that I’d been taken to hospital and showed up with some soup from a takeaway – in the middle of summer, it must have been something of an effort for him to find, but I was
unimpressed with his efforts, told him that I had a sprained ankle rather than a mild cold, but he followed with a genuine apology for all of his antics and we dated on and off for the next twelve years. Regular Sarah MacLean fare, that.”

“It could be if you were wearing regency-dress,” Charlotte smiled.

“In 2006? Empire waistlines had fallen out of fashion.”

“How did any of us get laid in those velour tracksuits?” Charlotte then laughed. “I for one am happy for the passage of time.”

“I never wore a tracksuit in all of my life,” Chiara claimed.

“And you have the most Austen-y love story of anyone I know,” Mary chided.

“Oh, do tell,” Effie echoed.

Chiara shook her head. “According to quite literally everyone else I’ve ever in my life encountered, William and I have the most aromatic countship of any couple in the history of the art. I had just finished my MBA at Harvard and one of my uncles wondered if I wouldn’t take a meeting around some transfer negotiation that had all but broken down. I had no interest in sport, even then, but family is family and to look at it in numbers, I imagined myself capable of getting the agent to agree to the terms we were offering. Seven hours later I realized I’d vastly overestimated myself, and William, sharing the same set of frustrations, suggested that we solve at least the most pressing, namely, that we were both ravished with hunger and we moved our meeting to a restaurant down the street.

“Sometime between his ordering a bottle of wine and the main course we began talking about market trends and he was extremely clever without being patronising in the least which, combined with wine taken on an empty stomach, lead me to believe that he was handsome – and he was, back then, if one could excuse his general Englishness,” she gestured at her face, making a motion with both hands as though to elongate it. “Anyway, we hailed our waiter to hail a cab and box the meal, he’d managed to remove my knickers on the way back to my hotel and after a night of raw passion I awoke in the morning with a massive headache and the sound of all of the gloriously fatty things you lot use to erase the effects of a night on the town. The two of us were enjoying breakfast in bed when Edna rang, reminding that I’d agreed to meet up with her and a few of our other friends from undergrad before a fashion show that same evening, reminding me that there was someone she knew would be attending the after party whom I simply had to meet.

“I explained all of this to William in my apologies as to why I was bound to cut our date short. He, after I clarified that I’d in fact meant Edna Hewlett, told me that he’d known her since childhood and was sure that whomever she though to set me up with would be simply horrible: a yuppie stockbroker, hedge fund manager, some pompous City-sort as uninteresting and uninspired as the conversation he’d likely offer up. I feared the same and confessed as much, and he told me he would keep an eye out for me, being on the guestlist himself as he was. There were some two-hundred people backstage if one is counting staff, models and the like, and for the first half an hour I did not see him and, in doing my upmost to avoid Edna without being obvious about it, found myself at the bar, alone, when she showed up with William and ‘Ah! Darling, this is the friend I told you about!’ and I, ‘Oh, the insufferable yuppie, enchanté!’ to her absolute horror, and William and I proceeded to spend at least the next fifteen minutes insulting one another as perfect strangers might. He proposed three months later.”

“That is defiantly a regency-piece,” Effie smiled at her. “Witty exchanges, whirlwind romance…”
“I still pretend, at least to myself, that I don’t know him from time to time. Effie,” she straightened, rising to her tip-toes and moving her hands more like a marionette than a frustrated sport-executive as she continued in a put-on, exaggeratedly proper nasal lisp of the kind American actors attributed the British landed gentry of having had in centuries past, “what you aren’t understanding about the situation into which you walked is that prior to your arrival, we Fine Ladies of this little Easter-Court explained to the Men-Folk our lack of interest in marathoning yet more of Mel Gibson’s entire filmography, and this assertion, rather than causing them to inquire into our collective preference.”

“Made in Chelsea,” Emma clarified. Effie raised her glass to clink it with several others.

“The lads decided to see what Netflix suggested and, in this task, discovered that ‘Eddie the Eagle’ and ‘Cool Runnings’ belonged to the same Olympiad … and they have been fighting, for the past – what must be two hours now over if there is any value in having winter games anymore as surely, they reached their peak in Calgary. It is the height of no-stakes, absurd arguments, and I … why I’m pretending that I don’t know William, as I’m sure Marisol is pretending that she doesn’t know Clayton, as Charlotte is pretending that she doesn’t know Danny … as darling Marie has been pretending since being cut away from the boy with a pair of police-plyers that she and Atty never met. You can dress it up however you want but love, sometimes … when one really looks at the other person … is nothing more than a sustained embarrassment.”

“And for that we’ve wine, cheese and leftover croissants,” Mary assured her before clapping as Chiara gave a small bow for her performance in the regency drama Effie found rather more pleasant in itself.

“I think I wanted the whole storybook romance,” she admitted, “even to hear the way you tell it. I think I wanted it so badly that even though things between Percy and I seemed perfect, that I swore to myself I liked the whole secret-romance of it all, I couldn’t – I remembered the narrative that John and I had and I … I just couldn’t let it go. Even before we kissed, I just -”

“All you did was kiss?” Mrs Tarleton squinted. “Little wonder you’ve never served the inspiration for any of the novellas to be found between woman’s glossies and low-carb cookbooks at grocery checkouts. Effie, you truly are a victim to you own want for words. Love isn’t a story, it is a feeling that only finds its form after the fact and who the fuck cares for fireworks when they have all turned to smoke and ash, when you are in the middle of real life and asked to explain to perfect strangers the circumstances under which you met, married, the conflicts you exaggerate for a laugh or the uninteresting truth in how desire overtook initial, internal doubt? We hear stories and think ‘that is romantic’ in a sense of ‘something in this story escapes my experience’ and for reasons that then defy explanation we seek to recreate that which we don’t need, which would not have occurred to us as worthwhile absent of judgement – be it genuine or simply imagined. My children, to illustrate the point I’m attempting to make, imagine that my husband and I were over-critical of their choice in partners, citing bigotry because it excuses them of self-critique.

“Charlotte,” she shifted, “Daddy never disliked Danny because of his skin-colour, he simply could not stand the thought of your promising yourself to a man who lacked the courage to ask him for your hand, knowing that you would never be satisfied by someone who looked to you to fight his every battle for him – and thus happily consented after Danny showed some indication that he could handle his own. Emma – likewise, the reason you’ve never moved things out of the bedroom with your boytoy is that he’s never given you any indication that his prowess extends past or exists outside of the sheets. Christ – that is the reason I think you are wasting your time with this one, not because of the direction he prays or doesn’t or because I can’t apricate a good fuck for its own sake – I have seven goddamn kids but beyond that, I was lucky enough to have a husband who challenged me in ways that allowed me to grow, how could I not want the same for my children? My problem now with Izzie’s Jason and John’s Angela, the problem I had with you, Mary-dear, at least initially,
was that I thought you too passive for one of mine. You smiled too much and I could never quite stand girls who do.

“And maybe that is your problem, Effie – you want to smile when it would serve you better to speak. And you are so, so preoccupied with moralising that you can’t enjoy the moment you are in. Why didn’t you sleep with John when he was ready to go?”

“Because I had just broken up with his brother,” Effie stammered.

“Where is the conflict? Is it wrong? Giving that construction – was it wrong for you to date Percy in the first place? Or, instead, was Percy an extension of your exhausting envy towards Ellie … was he someone who just didn’t give you the feel of a fairy-tale romance – adding to your resentment of your best friend’s failure to see her own story with the same wistful nomenclature you so like, ‘knights’ and ‘princesses’ and that?” the old dame raised an eyebrow.

“But that is actually correct -”

“Is it significant in a twenty-first century context?” Mrs Tarleton challenged. “Ellie and Ban can make it work because they both could be themselves without the other. But who are you, Effie Gwillim? Do you even know who it is you want to be?”

“I shouldn’t have to defend -”

“You are right. Nor should you feel any need to. If I were you, I’d throw that wine in my face and tell me and everyone else at the table that your expectations are worthy and worthwhile no matter how much life may have let us down, but you won’t – you confuse manners with meekness. Though, you should know – should it make a difference – that with the wine is exactly what your mum did to your aunt when she’d been discovered in her secret correspondence with the man who would become your father,” she winked. “really, it was then when the two became quite so close as they were. People … people always seem to have a lot to say about women of our ilk, women like me and Margaret, like your late mother and every other woman of consequence or consideration – but we can write our own stories. And you could, too. Why don’t you? And why … for the love of God, why would you write it about some man?

“Don’t mistake me, I’d be the last woman to make an argument that love could not serve your plot, just that it shouldn’t be your plot – the entire scope of how you see yourself ought not to be restricted to who you dated at school or in secret. There is more to you than kisses in cars and crying with your friends about them afterwards. At least, one might hope.”

“I … I know,” Effie said, trying to sound stronger than she felt.

In theatre it was called blocking and here hers felt off, but then, if life followed narrative structure of any sort, Marie Robinson reasoned she would not have any reason to note the set or where she stood in comparison to the scene’s other players.

She could hear her father laughing from the other side of the door with his lover and wondered if her life was not in fact poorly cast as she hazarded to knock. Arthur and Kitty (or Olivia, or Harriette, or Rebecca, or half of the other girls she knew) probably got to enjoy the mortifying experience of having a parent walk in on them mid-act, and they probably got to be embarrassed about it having little else to serve as a comparison for all that could go wrong. Marie knocked again - louder this time
- as tears began to stain her cheeks, black mascara and eyeliner meeting and mixing with alabaster concealer, coving skin shortly exposed as being as red as her eyes now were (and blotchy and acne-ridden besides) before coating it once more with a colour akin to the grey ash of a corpse. Marie was embarrassed of herself, of where she stood, of her childish want for simultaneous comfort and critique. She wanted to be fifteen, but could only connect with the anger of her age. Everything else, - every normal concern - felt lost on her when she had been asked to address them. She was not herself normal, and her extended family did not and could not understand because they were not either, but they were collectively able to ignore the things they lacked as though they did not exist for anyone else, either. It would get easier, she had been told, after school ended. Marie did no see how.

“Dad,” she said with some caution, doubting her opening dialogue that it remained largely the same as it would in any other scenario of teens and interrupted sex that she had ever seen depicted. “I’m so sorry, I -”

“Marie?” her father asked from the borrowed bedroom. She could hear fabric being suffered, sheets smoothed and clothing being pulled off the floor and over head and hips. “Darling, come in. Of course, come in. What is it that is troubling you?”

Marie opened the door as she had been bid with slight caution though what she saw told her she had nothing to apologise for. Ellie closed her laptop and gave her a smile. Her dad looked like he had been readying to take a shower as a bathrobe laid out on the other side of the bed spoke to, that he had only redressed himself in a hurry for this reason. “I thought you were,” she began. “I’m sorry, I, I shouldn’t.”

Her dad buried his face in his hand and offered his own muffled apologises. Ellie took over. “Is that what has you in tears? Marie – I thought this was settled between us. Your dad and I have no set plans to ‘start a family of our own’ as you’ve phrased it, we couldn’t be happier with you and your sister and there are other factors which … but,” she shifted uncomfortably, perhaps wondering what and how much had been overheard, “and maybe you are a bit young to fully understand this – but love seeks a form of expression, and between man and wife, even when there is no motive extending immediate need -”

“No. No – that is not it any that isn’t why, I just thought – it is fine, good even. I’m sorry,” Marie hurried forcing as many words as she could into the same breath, feeling another sob in her stomach that put the efficacy of her voice under threat, “I know you think I can’t be replaced, and that you love me and would never try to replace my mum, and you are right – you can’t, but can you just … can you talk to her maybe? Can you make her stop talking to me? It is more than I can bare,” she confessed before her crying began anew.

“What on earth did she say?” her dad asked as he moved to embrace her, letting her sob into his chest the way a child would before sitting her down on the side of the bed. Marie felt Ellie’s hand rubbing over her shoulders and felt worse for the affection she was being shown. She straightened herself as much as she could and in a clear voice borrowed from broadcast tried as best she could to explain.

“We were, most of us, down in the living room, watching some little kids’ film that was only of any real intrust to the adults who had grown up with it. Anyway, it is about ice-hockey -”

“Miracle?” Ellie asked for clarification.

“Mighty Ducks?” Ban tried, fighting the urge to smile which caused Marie to, if only for a moment.

“Yeah that,” she said. “It isn’t really a love story but there is this one scene with an intentionally awkward kiss and since the only purpose we served in still being there by like the forty-minute mark
and thereafter was to make fun of the film itself and everyone else watching, Rhys turned to me and said ‘oooooh, that is you and Arthur’ and then Maria and Ana and Ines and Matilde began to echo the ‘oooooh’ and Billy, who was sitting beside me, did as well, so I shoved him, and he hit me with a pillow and we were all having fun, but then … then Mum said that she would talk to you about relenting and letting me go to the dance next week. She wanted pictures of me and Arthur, she said – the awful kind taken in a house foyer to later show me when I could laugh about our whole almost-relationship, too, and then to pull out again when they will embarrass me once more, before my wedding or something like that.

“So,” Marie continued, again growing impossibly angry over the whole exchange, “I told her she doesn’t get to do that, that it is unfair to me to pretend that she is going to be around when she is refusing to undergo any further treatment that might allow her to do so. To pretend anything is or ever could be normal at all! She doesn’t get to do that. I left the living room and she followed me and started talking about talking and I was like ‘just stop! When have you ever wanted to be a mother to me? Why do you have to pretend that you are just enough that others won’t want to when otherwise it is just – it is all about you. You make a decision without thinking about how it affects anyone and we all have to pretend we are okay with it because the alternative is dealing with you when you are angry or depressed’ And I told her that meeting Thomas – I wish he was a monster, I really, really do, because then I could have had someone to blame for her, well basically her suicide – and stories around wealth and wills and inheritance are good because they are simple – there is like a legal construct for all of it and because we live in a free and fair society we have all collectively agreed to these rules. But it’s not – is it? It isn’t about that, any of it! like everything else it is just about her! Thomas is a victim of Mum’s ego, too, same as we all are – and I told her all of this and she started crying, saying that the doctors were only giving her a few months – with treatment, maybe she could last a few more, but she didn’t consider it worth it to live to ‘next June’ – that is what she said, next June – if she had to, and she put it in air-quotes ‘live’ like Susan’s nan, all up on life-support and I was like, ‘Yeah well, Susan is happy at least, that she has her nan around. She still sits with her and tells her what is going on in her life and chases Sergei from her bedside when he gets too cosy there – and next June – by next June I’ll have done my A-levels, I will know where I’m going to Uni, I’ll probably have made it past cadets and be training for and with the Olympic team, put you don’t want to see me succeed unless you think you have a say.’ And it is true! It is true! How very dare she say she loves me or Thomas or Dad or anyone or anything else when clearly all she wants is attention? To die in some dramatic fashion with as many people watching as possible so she can live on in all of our self-doubts ad infinitum. And you know what, she will – she has won.”

“Not if you have any fight left in you,” Ellie countered. “I know your mum, but I know you are sick of hearing phrases that sound like lines copied from grown-ups who think they are qualified to give advice applicable to your situation when they can’t begin to understand the specifics.” At this, Marie nodded. “You want your dad to tell you something about accepting people and enjoying the time you have as though those such ideals are easily obtained because you have grown accustom to being told you are wrong in this way – but you know what? Your dad isn’t there yet either,” she shook her head. “And neither am I, and neither are you, and whether you can accept it or not, neither is your mum – not really. She wants you to get mad if you are mad, to tell her off as much as you feel you need to so she’ll know what it is she is truly meant to say for herself, what will actually help you now and going forward. She is dying, Marie. If it happens this year or next, the result will be the same and I am probably wrong to say this, but there are no reassurances, no way to prepare yourself for the end or proper course of action for the time in between. You are perfectly within your right to complain. You should even.”

“But?”

“But – if you need to take a break from it all, you are more than welcome to stay up here for a while, help me and your dad collude as you collect yourself,” she winked. Ellie had a way about her that
made one forget the world even when she sought to remind of its vastness. Marie could not explain
why, but she felt better alone in having obtained permission from not to think about her mother for a
few minutes. She looked at her dad to see if this truly was alright and received a small nod.

“What are you conspiring to do?”

“Oh, my sister in law Anna needed to stop John Graves Simcoe from getting on a plane because the
woman he is seeing in the states is on her way here, so she – Lady Anna that is - was calling your
father non-stop – we thought, initially, about the fox hunt … until it got to the point where he
decided to take it that we could get back to … something you’ll understand when you are older,
perhaps -”

Marie understood quite well what Ellie was alluding to, but hearing sex so unsaid, her mind to her
reproductive education classes in school which were held on a monthly basis and had more to do
with Israeli basic training than babies or how they were made. As such, to hear Ellie suggest a word
she was as reluctant to say as Effie and most others in that age demographic (who knew that ‘no’
meant ‘no’ and ‘Brexit’ meant ‘Brexit’ but were as afraid to say ‘sex’ as they were to say anything
that could be construed by Russian teens posing as American activists on internet message boards as
‘xenophobic’ outside of context and intent) she imagined the world existing as thirty-somethings
seemed to suggest it ought in the utopia they would create as soon as Brussels no longer needed to be
considered or consulted – namely, every sexual suggestion turning not into that which might lead to
children (like herself, like her sister, like her best friend and likely at least half of the people
downstairs mocking the Mighty Ducks) but rather violent acts of disarmament. Picturing Ellie
fighting off her dad lustful advances as she spoke in buzzwords and otherwise cited the Maggie
Spinkels App, Marie began to laugh uncontrollably and knew herself instantly to be quite immature
for it.

“I just … none of you have any idea what you are doing, do you? You can’t define something we
understand perfectly well and seek to confuse us with vague constructs of time: ‘when you are older’
or repetition meant to serve the place of synonym: ‘no means no’, all while at the same time making
us revise on the daily that we might be able to explain the complexities of, say, Schleswig-Holstein in
the nineteenth century and its just – it is just funny!” she told as her step-mum looked on in surprise.
“You were having sex with my dad and got interrupted by Effie and then Anna and I guess John and
now me, but all I can think of is you beating him up because he called you pretty or something. I
don’t know – you don’t get it, do you? I’m sorry, I don’t mean to – I know I am supposed to take
this stuff seriously – and I do, believe me, I do,” she added for her father’s benefit, “but don’t you
think that you – all of you – take the censor just a little too far? At least sometimes?”

“You are right to cite that as the problem of my generation,” Ellie returned with a light smile. “We
ever take things to and past the extremes logic would otherwise define. Do you really want to
know the kind of trouble I’ve been getting myself into?”

Marie sot a look at her father, who looked mortified as she felt. “No … no that is okay. I’m sure I’ll
experience it when I’m older and … even then, Ban is almost my dad and has been since memory …
that is just – okay, fine, you and Aunt Effie are right about everything. Sex is gross and I really don’t
want to know.”

Ellie let out a laugh, “Heavens child! No – I meant with,” she stopped, allowing her smile to take a
characteristic that could only be described as Hewlett-esque as she continued, “It is fun to watch you
squirm though. To watch anyone squirm, really. And that is what this is about. Anna was phoning
your dad to ask him if he could block Mr. Simcoe’s passport, to keep him in England so that he and
Mrs. Woodhull would not miss one another. But the world as it works – it isn’t quite so easy as that.
Your dad explained to Anna that he would need a court order, which he could in theory expedite,
but not without cause. He tried to call himself, but Mr. Simcoe seems to have either his phone or his hearing-aid off, so I took the initiative and contacted someone I know at the airport, asking if a small amount of hash couldn’t find its way into Mr. Simcoe’s coat at baggage claim – not enough to suggest intent to distribute – no, that is further than I feel the situation really warrants. But an arrest has been made all the same, he has missed his flight, and I’m waiting on my man, on Percy, to arrive here so he can go down to the station and post bail before driving to the airport to pick Mrs. Woodhull up. Since Effie - who imagines she has some role to play in all of this - is already here, she can go along too, and then they will all get a chance to talk over all of their problems and I’ll have earned myself a few weeks of peace and quite as they will inevitably have come to the consensus that I’m a bitch in all of this for all of my better efforts, thus allowing me to focus on my own family and on work that matters as opposed to whatever post-adolescent paranoia is presently holding altogether too much power over people, who, frankly, should really know better at their age.”

“Um, Ellie, there is a problem, a big one in all of this -” Marie began.

Ellie simply smiled reached behind her to the nightstand and opened its drawer to reveal a magazine of the metal variety. “You don’t think I’d give someone like Effie a loaded firearm, do you? She is at no risk to herself or anyone else -”

“Well, not like that maybe not … but she and John, they stopped and snogged on the way here,” Marie explained uncomfortably. “And Grandma told her that it isn’t a problem, that her bigger problem is her willingness to let any man play the leading role in her own story, but I think – I mean, for me, and I know the dangers of projecting our own personal experience on other people’s specific situations, but all the same, I mean, with Arthur, last night, it felt like a problem, that I kissed him knowing he has a girlfriend, and maybe for Effie, I mean, I think she must feel the same way.”

“No, fuck it, you know what the problem is?” Ban sighed in frustration. “John can’t let anything go. That is why he is after Effie even though he is in love with someone else. That is why he is still so fucking pissed off that I was more popular at school than the was as though it has any bearing on anything we encounter today. Fuck it. I’m out. You can both … do whatever you think needs to be done with this, or do nothing. I’m – Marie, you are right. We don’t know what we are doing any better than you do. Just most of us have reached a point where we can accept responsibility for our actions. I’ll go talk to your mum, if that is really what you want.”

“But it really might be better if it is coming from you. Don’t look to other people to solve your problems, Marie, much as we both know your dad and I would like to,” Ellie said. “Most of the time, they will persist if you don’t face them yourself.”

He did not say anything after she had finished leaving a voice message. Anna Hewlett did not hear the radio in the car over the sound of her own heavy pulse, over her breath, over her pounding thoughts. She watched the street lamps, the sidewalks, the corners that they passed, half-certain they had missed the motorway on-ramp before she could bring herself to speak.

“This isn’t what I intended.”

Her husband Edmund did not reply.

When they reached a light, she tried again, “Mary’s flight lands at four – UK time, so she’ll probably ring back within the hour, I told her -”
“I heard,” he said sharply.

“I’m sorry.”

“You had John arrested and detained on charges that . . .,” he trailed off, his expression shifting like a kaleidoscope of concern and controlled fury. “I don’t think it is safe, Anna. I think our position is too delicate in itself to tamper with how our closest friends are inconvenienced – ultimately as the result of their own personal failings – when it forces us to show our hand. Ellie holds too much favour within the police force and I don’t think it wise with Effie Gwillim around to give any indication of just how far the Tarletons local influence extends.”

“Do you think that is why he turned me down?” Anna asked.

“No, I really don’t think he was lying about not having the direct power to block John’s passport. I think he would have done it if he could. They are the same sort, him and Ellie. Maybe we all are. You are, certainly -”

“Edmund,” she swallowed. She felt his hand on hers.

“I don’t blame you. I’m just . . . I’m concerned. And it is not from a lack of love or understanding its – I know now why you are the way you are with Jordan. You are afraid of relinquishing power and I . . . sympathise, certainly, but all the same, it has gotten to a point where you are hurting not only our friends and my family with your constant need to control every moment of his experience and exposure, but you are hurting yourself and you are hurting him. What do you think it is going to be like when the baby is born?” he demanded, “I’m sure you’ll be every bit as devoted to it, which will subtract from the attention you can bestow on Jordan, and what then? He will see it as a betrayal, this small sibling who has suddenly come and robbed him of mummy’s love, whereas if you would simply, if you let him go out and explore now under the supervision of those you know will care for him and keep him safe, he might yet come to have a healthy bond with our little one, with you – and if we are going to extend this to the local conclusion, with every woman he’ll ever be in any sort of relationship with. It is my fault. I was gone for a large chunk of your pregnancy and I know for a while it seemed as though he was all you had, but Anna you have so much if you would just see . . .”

“It isn’t that. With my first pregnancy. I didn’t know I was pregnant until my second trimester. I was depressed and struggling with my weight as it was and I just thought -”

“Are you depressed now?”

“I’m sorry. There is a difference. Are you calling me fat?” she tried to joke, suddenly feeling less confident in her looks or how Edmund saw her, not only for her physical attributes. This was a second attempt of leaving her son to his grandmother’s care, and, for Anna, perhaps a last chance in ways she was only beginning to appreciate. Edmund had been on edge all day after Anna, in an effort to avoid a series of had conversations she was hardly prepared for had shared Mary’s gossip, had watched her friend become the subject of press speculation, had tried to make amends for it all. She felt like she had failed on all fronts.

“You’re pregnant. There is a difference,” he mirrored her words without humour.

“I’m three months,” Anna said flatly.

“Then we have another six to work on sorting our some of our issues,” Edmund seemed to agree before again falling into his own silenced speculations. Anna returned her eyes if not her attention to the streets they passed, recognising that they seemed to be traveling in the direction of the Planetarium, perhaps out of habit.
“You missed the on-ramp.”

“We aren’t going to Setauket. Not yet.”

“Where then?”

“A date.”

“A date?” Anna snorted. “After -”

“Anna, I’m upset about last night, sure. I’m upset that you told me about Mary Woodhull’s theory that my sister had been with child as a means of delaying a conversation that I find had been long overdue. I don’t know that I ought to have rung her when I did or that I ought to have let you give the explanation as to how this assumption was arrived at. I’m sorry she wound up getting hurt, but then that might have been expected – she has never been a strong equestrian or a keen one for that matter and … this whole thing with her and Ban … the two spent so long pretending the attraction was not there between them that they have no idea how to be lovers now. I feel for him, truly, with everything he is going through in his personal life, and I can’t lie and say that it doesn’t worry me that giving the way he has been positioned politically -”

Anna took a deep breath. “I know it isn’t my place. I know I’ve messed enough up for enough people as it is but I’m sorry – insofar as your brother-in-law is concerned - good. Let him show his strength. If a result of all of this is England getting a reminder that the man they have all but empowered to keep the Home Nations intact post-Brexit wields considerable influence of his own, absent their favour, his marriage to your sister, his friendships with the Princes and with Rawdon over there in Northern Ireland, they might let him actually negotiate a better deal with Brussels, if say … the suggestion exists that his ambitions extend beyond Merseyside,” she suggested, throwing up her arms in the frustration she felt being alone within the family in respect to this assessment. “If I were Edna, I would be doing everything I could to encourage it. Your house should be showing its strength right now rather than shrinking behind the show of PR the Windsors are putting on with their own American. Let one head of state make Ban an offer or overtone of the recognition of Scotland’s independence and everything will fall into place in the panic. If Westminster comes to think they can’t hold us, we can negotiate a separation with favourable trade arrangements that would force the rest of Europe to reach the same deal.”

“Ban is against independence.”

“Which is why Edna should be exploiting his love for Britain. His constituency is already seeing some of the promised benefits of leaving the EU, but the only way Liverpool is going to sustain its current growth is if the transition is a ‘soft’ one, and what better way than to remind England that the UK in its whole shares a land boarder than to suggest another closer to home? If in the end all we do is avert a hard Brexit – it is certain better than the alternative Westminster is forcing into effect at the moment. Get him on board or let him be blind sighted by the idea of an actual coup – all you ultimately need from him is an effort to step it back which his government has both tasked him with and done everything to hinder. On that note – it might be enough if we let the press tease the idea that Ellie is with child -”

Edmund sighed and shook his head. “It is as though you actively planned this entire episode.”

“I didn’t,” Anna denied truthful, “it just has me thinking of the larger picture. Your reaction to everything, anyway.”

“Pity,” Edmund smiled. “You are quite good at this.”
“I don’t think you understand me, Edmund. I don’t want Richmond myself if it can be avoided. I’m more … aggressive than Edna, that may well be but … the thing is, it has been five weeks since I last heard the phrase ‘Emoluments Clause’ on the news and with the current happenings at City Hall, I could do better to continue without it for a little while, at least until I’ve secured funding for the infrastructure measures that I want to enact in my tenure. After that well, who knows? Maybe the next time we’re in Scotland I’ll find improvements that can be made to municipalities you may one day hold responsibilities towards,” she smiled.

“I think we are going to be okay, you and I.”

“Me too. If only our friends were as easily sorted as an unprecedented event in international diplomacy.”

“If only,” Edmund agreed more solemnly. Anna shared his concern but thought it best not to show it.

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John Graves Simcoe passed the length of the cell in two strides, turned and walked back in the other direction only to repeat the action again. And again. As he had for what he estimated was at least a half an hour by this point. He wondered about his confiscated belongings, about the luggage he had checked – if he might have done better to use his single call to ring someone in Washington to go to baggage claim on his behalf, wondering that Abe’s face came to mind when it occurred to him that Mary was still not taking his calls –

- that rather than solve his problems, he made true the lies that had exposed him to how very far he had fallen from where he intended to be.

He wondered if Effie was ultimately behind this, if she had rushed into the farmhouse in the same teary state in which she slammed the door shut without offering a proper farewell, saying instead that which he already knew, what he had forgotten in the familiarity of a certain melancholy he had come to associate with the woman he had long loved, ‘this is wrong’ and ‘you should get back.’

He wondered if Effie had changed her mind about ‘them’, if he might have done better to ask though he knew nothing could come from it when he remained in love with someone else.

John had used his single phone call to ring Ellie and assault her with accusations – he knew she had friends at the station, he knew she was somehow responsible for the marijuana that had been found on his person; it seemed to him afterwards that in the course of their short conversation, he ‘knew’ quite many things, none of them having anything to do with the people, he still assumed, whom he was being punished for hurting.

He had demanded that she bail him out to which he received an uncommitted >>I’ll send someone. << ‘Someone’ John thought as he paced, may well have come by this time had he instead asked how she was, how Effie was, if Marie was holding up ‘o’rite’ after her run in at the same station the night before.

It was not that he did not care.

It was that it did not occur to him to show it.
He had lost Mary in what must have seemed to her a sustained effort of taking her and her love for
granted, same as her first marriage had existed and ended. And now they had found each other again,
Abe and Mary, their shared son Thomas, the girls John had fathered but often could not bear to be
around. He should have gone to Jeanne’s ballet classes, he should have gone with Percy to his studio
as planned. He should have Skyped when he said he would, he should have called –

Perhaps, instead of calling Ellie, he should have called his brother. Not to ask for bail but to offer and
apology. Perhaps he should have called Samuel and Margaret, or the Nantabas, or any of the many
with whom he knew he needed to make amends.

He should have called Mary, if only to tell her he loved her, that he would be back as soon as he
could manage. That he would make things right as he might dare hope them to ever be.

Another hour passed. John walked back and forth until his legs grew weary and he laid himself out
on the cement slap that could be said to serve the roles of bench and bed accordingly - at least, for a
man of a smaller stature than his own. He tossed and turned but instead of finding comfort, he found
paint chipping around some old graffiti, notes about who had been here when lost to time.
Somewhere, he reasoned, his own initials might well be found below a line of poetry he had thought
himself especially clever for coming on in his youth and began chipping away at the new coat as he
questioned if this could truly be the same holding cell he had once sat in as a boy, terrified and trying
not to show it as he waited with the children who remained, whose parents could not be reached or
could not be bothered. As he chipped away at the new coat, his back turned to the door in a
conscious effort to shield his hands from the eyes of those who might be right in naming the act of
curiosity defacement and charge him with damages, he recalled the last time he had been at this
particular police station in a cell normally used to house the drunk and disorderly until such time as
they sobered up. Much of the same cast was involved, Effie, Ellie, Ban and he spent a few hours too
long in the company of the latter, when his Godfather could not be reached to give his consent for
the Tarletons to collect him with the others imprisoned for breaking into a football stadium and his
Worship had left his son behind in the cell out of the mistaken notion that he appreciated the boy’s
company or that Ban was willing or able to repent.

It could not have been the same cell, John reasoned after he had carefully exposed a fair bit of
writing – initials that meant nothing to his eyes. The room, as memory recalled, had been bigger, and
so had the world outside of the station itself. Now that everything seemed lost, he had no conception
of space, distance, of the passage of time. Perhaps it was the same room and he had been here so
long he had forgotten that he never left. The cell seemed smaller and smaller still and John curled
himself up, burying his head as tightly as he could against his knees for it was all he could do to stop
himself from screaming.

For a moment, he imagined he was until he realised the sound that he heard was the cell’s metal door

“I didn’t ask for representation -” he began before the petit redhead in six-inch patent leather heels
and an expression that promised his head would soon ache at least as much as her feet did slid past
the guard.

“Well you certainly asked someone something,” Mary Woodhull sneered. John wished the officer
had stayed to stand guard. Alone with his solicitor, he felt he was already on trial -

- He felt as though he may well be sent to the gallows without the benefit of one.
Effie Gwillim was still wearing his ring. Maybe it was hers now. Percy did not have it within him to ask. It was late in the evening and he had driven most of the day. His legs and back were sore, his eyes burned in the dry air of the home as the adjusted to the light. He rubbed at them, thinking it might inspire moisture, thinking it might make the ring disappear.

It did neither.

All the gesture produced was another attempt at hospitality on part of the Tarletons (“Can I make you a coffee? A tea?”) both of which Percy declined in his weariness, unable to stomach another chemical substitute for sleep. The family members who had gathered in the home’s foyer to greet him (or, more exactlying, to get a look at ‘John Graves Simcoe’s prodigal brother’ as the family’s London-based lawyer put it to her two younger sisters in a tone that teased of gossip kept) became increasingly creative, extravagant with their offers. “Cake?” “Crisps?” “Oi, something stronger, lad?” a chorus of male voices seemed to say in simulation. “I’m so sorry, we were not expecting guests at this hour or this evening at all, and have not prepared a meal – if you give me around half an hour, I’m certain that I could toss something proper together,” explained one of the sisters, slightly flustered. Percy guessed this was Emma by Charlotte’s snippy “By which she means catering can be called in and put out on the good china -” that followed; he smiled and declined graciously. He was here on business.

“Want to watch a movie with us anyway? We are on the second instalment of the Mighty Ducks franchise – about to start the third,” one of Ban’s brothers asked with the same light smile that spoke of unfulfillable promises made with lobbyists’ money. Again, Percy politely declined. Before he could ask where Lady Eleanor was, he was told she had been thrown from a pony by one of the younger children speaking in over-enunciated English without a grasp on proper syntax and recalled loosely something his employer’s husband had said about his nieces struggling with the subject at some German private school in Milan for at home they heard their parents speaking (mostly) in Portuguese. (Probably in a general rant around globalization, though the MP was fluent in two additional unrelated languages and had a functionally illiterate understanding of at least three more.) He made an effort to afford the girl an encouraging smile as one of her sisters hissed, “that is not what it is called – cavalo! Ca-va-a-llo: ‘Horse’ – idiota! Pony é pônei.”

“That’s what brings me here as well,” Effie said of the little girls’ conversation. “She’s upstairs, do you want me to -”

“Covering the incident, are we?” Percy asked. “I’m sure I can find the way.”

“Percy, please. I’m. No – no I wouldn’t. I really just came to check on her.”

“I got called into work. If you’d be so kind as to excuse me. Thank you for the hospitality, everyone,” he said as he negotiated his way through the gathered group, “I don’t wish to interrupt your evening. Enjoy your Easter.”

He made his way up the stairs hastily, oddly certain that they would. From the top of the stairwell he could hear the men as they continued to debate the merits of winter sport over what had smelt like cognac, the children scamper about after each other until one of the women cautioned them not to run in the house. It seemed so routine. For a moment, Percy caught himself imagining his own extended family in the same setting, wondering if it could ever have existed in this form, wondering if, unbeknownst to him, it had.

>>Gewgle it, fuck'n - e'yer. De United States beat de Soviet Union in de ninteun-eighty Winti Games in Lake Placed, New York - not eight years ron in Canada wi’ all yer uvver comic occurrences.
Kekka yer kite, drop it. Am done!<< someone shouted out of sight with enough hatred and frustration that affection was all Percy heard. That was the difference that defined family – people who could stand up for and in opposition to one another and still stand each other at the day’s end. Everyone downstairs seemed fully invested in this argument though no one, insofar as Percy knew, had any interest in the subject of which they spoke. The code was not hard to crack. They said ‘why don’t you realise that I am only harsh because I care about you guys?’ and ‘we treat wealth as an ersatz for love which we consider a limited resource, yet we don’t call as often as we should because we spend too much time at the office.’ They asked, ‘if I can accept the consequences of my choices, why can’t you?’ and answered, ‘because I don’t know who I am without you to take care of -’ and then ‘you are afraid you’ll like yourself less when left to your own devices.’ Mostly they seemed to ask if they were seen at all, and when, then why – for their flaws? For their success? For some notion of family name that stood a very real risk of dying out with their generation as the three sons they had produced between them bore the names of their respective partners?

What was a name? Percy wondered to himself.

For a long while, he had the luxury of imagining that he would feel whole if his surname had been Simcoe, that he would have never needed to fight for those abstracts the evaded him, that seemed so easy from the outside -

Perhaps they were. Perhaps he simply was not up for it.

Percy Nantaba knocked on the door frame when he saw the divide open and askew. Ellie said, “Ah!” and gestured for him to enter with a smile; Marie, who sat cross-legged and slouched on the bed beside her patting one of her dogs suddenly fell into a frown.

“Is everything alright?” Percy asked.

“Pfft!” Ellie exhaled in a hard half-whistle. “It isn’t so terrible as it looks,” she told of her contusions. “Emma is angry because my mother-in-law told her this morning that she thinks it best that she move out of the estate for the time being that Izzie and Jason can enjoy their life as newlyweds for the next few weeks at least. She will hire a nurse to help the couple care for the baby in its infancy and pay Emma’s petrol to take her to work and back. Ban and John both offered their homes as an alternative to her childhood bedroom until they work out a more permanent solution – Izzie buying Emma out of her shares in this place, perhaps – but naturally she isn’t hearing any of it, and, needing someone to blame as children in their thirties tend to, decided on me. Diplomacy, Percy, as my bruising may attest, is so very underappreciated,” she shifted, “but I fear that is precisely what I’ve called on you to engage in on my behalf.”

“Marie? What about you – alright, Kiddo?” he asked. “I read about -”

“No, not for me,” the girl answered. “My dad has it covered … well, I mean he says that the difference between diplomacy and politics is that in politics, you still think you can win, so that is probably what … well, that or war. That is how it goes: politics-diplomacy-war, but he’s not so keen on the second step. But wars … it is funny because they can’t be won. He says no one in the armed forces thinks of victory as anything but moving a little bit closer to an exit strategy, that we always fight about the same things and find ways to fit them into generational morals and mores through propaganda, and regardless of what is surrendered or won, peace is only a sustained ceasefire. But someone will shoot again. They always do. I think actually … diplomacy doesn’t exist because it can’t exist, but everyone wants to believe that they are more than what they are.”

“That is … encouraging,” he grimaced. The girl could be far too dark at times, not that it was not deserved.
“I’m too ‘diplomatic’ when it comes to my mum, whatever that should mean,” Marie continued to explain of her father’s absence. “Ellie isn’t diplomatic at all, she just refuses to actively engage in a battle she didn’t pick.”

“And that is why I am here?”

“No, you are here because you ‘still think you can win’ as my husband evidently puts it and I want to supply you with the means of achieving that end. A few hours ago, I gave Effie around five-hundred quid in an act of haste, I need you to go downstairs and collect that from her – collect her as well, if you are still so inclined, and then go to Canning Place to pay your brother’s bail.”

“John’s bail?” Percy clarified.

“His girlfriend came to the same assumptions that you did upon seeing Effie’s new accessory and is flying to Britain to confront John. He, meanwhile, is upset for the more legitimate reason that she has been living with her ex while working in Washington, and as my dear, sweet sister in law who is responsible for at least half of everything that has transpired thinks that everyone else needs to have the sort of honest, open conversation that she herself has mastered to art of avoiding, well, that is what you are going to do.”

“Why was John arrested?”

“Possession of a controlled substance,” Ellie told him dismissively. “Recreational. It won’t carry a charge but it has served its purpose of keeping him in country.”

“No,” Percy told her. Ellie smiled and leaned forward in anticipation.

“Ellie … Dr Tarleton, I – I’ve been considering my employment, reconsidering it, rather, and I think, I think that in truth I came to hand in my notice.”

“Ah, well that is rather dramatic,” she said, holding up a finger to him as she turned to Marie. “Do you see now what I meant about landing myself the lion’s share of fault? Percy, if you are quitting because of Effie and John, it is really not my place but from what I understand of the situation she was trying to help him get up the courage to propose to Mary Woodhull –”

“It isn’t because of Effie. Or because of John or because of you or anyone else,” he told her honestly, “It is because of me. I … driving had me thinking, examining my thought-process, perhaps it is better said. I sought this position initially hoping it would bring me into the same circles as my biological family, but – no, no but, it has. I accomplished what I had hoped to here, ad now it is time for me to move on. Of course, I will stay until a suitable replacement can be found, but I – I would like to leave by the start of summer semester, if it is all the same. I have enough in my savings to afford graduate school and being in Leicester these past few days, I think that I want to go back. I want to stay. With my parents, for a few weeks, until I find my own place. My real parents. So that is it. I’ve spent four years digging up the past in a figurative sense and now I want to go back to – well, it is mostly waiting tables, tending bar and hoping whatever paper you are working on the day-over will let you go off and carbon date faecal matter in the summer, but it is, if I am being realistic with myself as one must be at some point I suppose, it is the life I want to live. The one I’ve been chasing here is … it is not mine. It is not even John’s. In the end, it is just not worth it.”

“Well, if you are sure it is for your further education, I’ll hardly stand in the way,” Ellie smiled, deceptively calm. “I’ll write a letter of recommendation, or, alternatively, as my brother’s name carries more weight in academia, I’ll delegate the task, pay your tuition, and, once you have finished your advanced degree, open myself to the possibility of funding your future digs. But so long as we are being ‘realistic’ as you suggest, it falls on me to remind you that no one ever stops working for
the Hewletts and there may well come a day where I want answers and accountability out of Athens, and you, dear Percy, will be asked to step in – dig something up for me or ah … find me a spot where one might be buried. I’m afraid, as I know the whole nation to be, that my husband’s esteemed colleagues just are not up to task,” she pressed her lips into a pretty pout. “He is right though … diplomacy is a fallacy, but you – you and I – we speak in realities, do we not?”

Percy felt his heart stop. “Ellie,” he swallowed, “I can’t kill -”

“No, of course not, that would be a ridiculous ask. Do us a favour and try to stick to the agreed to construct of this conversation?” she seemed to plead. “So, Arnold – that is, the American Defence Secretary once reportedly said something along the lines of ‘you can either be a soldier or a spy’ and you, Percy, are certainly not the former but such hardly subtracts from your value. I’m going to let you leave, as you ask, but I’m never really going to let you go, but so that we might all part on good terms if this is to be goodbye – I’m asking that you get my money back from Effie Gwillim, go bail John Graves Simcoe out of the cell he would otherwise be held in for the evening and wherever things go from there to leave me out of it, at least for the rest of the weekend for this all has me feeling rather restless … and, we know how that ends.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Marie said. “I mean, I think you and Effie need to talk but – there are enough schools in London, can’t you -”

“Sweetheart,” Ellie addressed her. “Sometimes we have to accept that what is best for the people we love isn’t always going to comply to our immediate wishes. I’m proud of Percy and you could learn from his example.”

Marie rose, clearly not able to accept this answer at its face. “Percy – I think … maybe you could learn from mine,” she began. “You started to ask me about last night …” the girl trailed off, less certain than she had seemed when she started.

Percy felt concerned on her behalf. “About you and young Mr Wellesley, yes,” he nodded.

“Um, it wasn’t what it looked like. Not what the papers said and not what it … what actually happened, even that isn’t – I was upset about my mum, not upset but scared to see her because, well … I mean she just is who she is and we clash and really it is my dad … he just can’t take it. And Arthur, I don’t think he really wanted to go there with me, I just think he doesn’t know where he wants to go, like full stop. Like he is about to take his A Levels and after that he’s talked about enlisting or applying to an officerial academy, but I don’t know, I just can’t see him of all people doing anything of note in the armed service and maybe he can’t either. But you know: ‘Kids with famous names.’ And so, I mean, we kissed but … we didn’t. Not really. You understand that … right?” she tried.

“I understand that there is something I’m not being told.”

“Because it is not really her place,” Effie said from the doorway.

“How long have you been listening?” Percy asked as he turned to meet her gaze, realising uncomfortably that due to his size and the length of his shadow neither Elie of Marie had known her to be there either.

“Long enough to know that it is over, regardless of how I answer or expand.”

“Well, apparently words like ‘end’ and ‘exit strategy’ have no real meaning, especially when ‘one never stops working for the Hewletts’.”
“There is always that,” she replied with a half-smile.

It was more than Percy had expected or felt was deserved giving his recent behaviour.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot to add notes when this first posted (sorry!), so quickly, in order:

The books Effie references in quick succession as she contemplates suicide in the opening paragraphs are (in order) Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, and Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles. Why didn’t I go with Theodor Fontane’s Effi Briest if the running theme was 19th century adultery tragedies? Come on …

Jordan Pickford is a goalkeeper for both Everton and the England NT, as mentioned in the text, he also DJs at raves … but um, while his name came up, nothing in this passage was actually about Jordan Pickford. I’ll leave the house music description to you to decipher.

Dick Cheney is the former Vice President of the United States of America. Fun fact! He was the second man to shoot someone point blank whilst holding that title.

Mitch McConnell is the Senate Majority Leader. To date he is the only current politician to have been given a direct role in the H+S series, so I’m sure I’ve done a full bio before at some point.

Phillip Augustus, who invented modern bureaucracy, was the first King of France (before that the title was ‘King of the Franks.’) He would likely be more remembered by history and his reign more studied if he didn’t just happen to play at the same time as the medieval warfare equivalents of like Messi and Ronaldo.

Mary Anne’s “Plantagenet saga of kiosk-quality erotica” came up in H+S, where Emma critiques her friend for not making the sex good enough, having recent experiences to go on. The story (there) centres on Richard the Lionheart’s younger sister Jeanne of England, who was briefly betrothed to Saladin’s younger brother Al-Adil, known as Saphadin in the west from his honorific Sayf ad-Din ("Sword of Faith"). Eleanor of Aquitaine was “the wife of two kings, mother of three”; in England she was seen as a wicked queen for centuries until feminism dug her name out of history books and put her on a pedestal. Good on them/her.

Hennes is a title, not a name. The goat is the oldest mascot in the Bundesliga and the only living one (maybe anywhere) – beyond his abduction, everything else in Mary’s narrative about the WAGs in Baden Baden in 2006 is 100% historically accurate, down to Victoria Beckham actually speaking of crowns and abdications. Since I am on
this, you guys want another football related love story? O’rite! The Rooneys met at school when they were both twelve and have been dating since they were sixteen (aw!)

If you take out the modern elements and stick the thing in London, every detail of Mary and Ban’s early courtship is 100% historically accurate, down to her twisting her ankle in a minor carriage accident and his finding out about this in a paper and bringing her soup with an apology for I guess winning her on a bet.

Everything insinuated about Serie A’s popularity is 100% historically accurate, if not factually based (have fun figuring that one out.)

Sarah MacLean is the author of young-adult historical romances, whose work I’m not myself familiar with.

I’m also not familiar with the Mighty Ducks franchise (which was a little before my time, same as MacLean is a little after) beyond a vague notion that it exists. If I got anything wrong … does it matter? (I’m actually quite sure the Tarletons would say ‘yes’, but only to be contra for its own sake.)

The language the girls are speaking at the end is in fact Portuguese. If it happens to look exactly like Italian, well … I mean doesn’t that just make José’s claim about having learnt Italian in three weeks pretty uh … unimpressive? No wonder he is afraid to come to the Bundesliga with our der – die – das and 50+1 rule.

Okay, that is me then. Cheers!
A Parting

Chapter Summary

Mary has it out with John, Effie has it out with Percy, Percy has it out with John, Atty has it out with Ban, and Marie has had just about as much as she can take.

Chapter Notes

So, I grew up in the north where most of our celebratory traditions are borrowed from funeral rites (really), but now I live in Koblenz, which is like a suburb (or satellite) of Köln which means Karnival is a Thing™ and every year I’m forced to endure odd looks around the whole, well … my just not getting it. From the perspective of a transplant, it is just old men telling bad jokes over clownish-music and the day-drinking one would have to engage in to endure it.

All this is to say, I think these sorts of festivities are something you’d have to be born into – and not only that, I think one would need family in the area to truly partake.

Surprisingly (given the general scope of my interests) I’m myself pretty object to drink prior to a ‘ladylike’ hour, even on a weekend, even in a stadium – in fact I can only think of a few exceptions to the rule (all of them around relatives: ‘Kaffee und Kuchen’ and whiskey!), midday wedding of a distant cousin (complete with an open bar and undanceable music) … and, well, any other scenario giving an older individual whom one has only ever met under like-circumstance a stage to discuss how so-and-so who was married to so-and-so who they knew in the second class died (Tragic! – for such always is) but then … this may be a northern thing I’m misattributing to an entire language-bloc the same way everyone across any boarder (political or otherwise) thinks Oktoberfest is nation-wide and Karnival is fun -> and maybe it would be, if my mother-in-law lived nearby and I thus felt the need for a mild sedative. Tja.

Segue: This is the penultimate chapter! Yay! And it has all one requires for getting s---faced before noon: family, pizza, and the corpse that I guess is needs must for any ‘real’ sense of festivity … this is a Hide and Seek biproduct, after all.

As always, thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Technically, he was grounded and, under this construct, Arthur Wellesley ought to have taken some personal level of satisfaction from the fact that he was standing with the prettiest girl in his year at a takeaway, exchanging shy glances and stuttering though words with no meaning whilst he contemplated if he ought to put his arm around her; except, aside from sharing an awkward aesthetic with a first date, nothing in this night qualified as a normal adolescent experience.

He walked back to the counter, pulled a few napkins from the dispenser to serve as tissues in the
event that Harriet began to cry again. When the pizza maker gave him what he interpreted as a look of annoyance – as though to say he had reached for more than that which was on offer – Arthur ordered a bottled water as a means of justifying his standing so close to the register so long after placing his initial order.

It was a good cover he decided as he carried the bottle back to the girl who had offered to come with him - Arthur suspected, for the same reasons he himself had left: There was nothing left to say that could be said. No words he had ever learnt, at least.

All the same, Harriet looked like she might well break into a sob; a bottled water might come as a kind gesture whereas a premature tissue could well incite ire, for girls took offence to any suggestion that they were not seen as they wished to be viewed. Harriet, likely, thought herself to be putting on a brave face in all of this, and truly, she was and would be even if a tear should fall, but it would come as not help to her if he should say these things. Instead, when Arthur returned to her side, he offered her a drink, which she accepted graciously and greedily.

Outside, the air was damp, cold and clammy, the kind that caused one to feel alone and far from home as it settled into bones and soul, reminding of how very pleasant it was to wrap up in warm blankets with a hot tea and watch the fire dance in the hearth. Here, where they had taken shelter from Britain in the early spring, it was hot but far from dry, the air moist, heavy and thick with the scents of the items on offer. Harriet, however, drank as though they were in a dessert. It did not fit. Arthur found himself hoping that she would save some for him though he had not been thirsty until he watched the water touch her lips.

“Sorry,” she said, handing the bottle back with less than a third of its prior volume. Arthur shrugged and told her she could finish it, feeling uncomfortable when he realised that she, too, noted the smile that briefly crossed his lips.

“What is it?” Harriet asked of the short break in form.

“You know Marie Robinson from school?” he returned. This, admittedly, was a stupid question which earned him a dumb expression. Naturally Harriet knew Marie. Everyone did. The student body was itself small and the two were “friends” in the sense that only girls could be, for Harriet was far prettier, Marie far richer and more well-connected, which put them into an open competition for the affection and admiration of the same people. Harriet probably gave Marie and undo amount of her mind and she probably hated her with all that she was. The sentiment was probably shared, but so to were a goodly number of their friends, and the two girls thus planned shopping trips together, went out for coffee before or after school or sport, and otherwise went about whatever else it was girls actually did whilst plotting each other’s demise in ways that would never come to fruition. Arthur should have been able to arrive at a more detailed assumption for Kitty spoke of such themes, but most of the conversations he had with his girlfriend ended with him being bored by it and her claiming that he was not listening or that he would not understand anyway – sentiment (or so Arthur gathered from his mates who were also involved in semi-committed relationships) that all girls were fond of throwing around.

“It is just … she is always on about how I am a poor host because I never think to offer snacks and sips when she comes over to study. That is why I thought … maybe, the pizza might help…” he trailed off. When he ordered, he had been told ‘forty minutes.’ It had been twenty-five and he still had a quarter hour to fill with a girl whose offer to come along and help him carry the food back to the wake Arthur had accepted in unspoken acknowledgement of Harriet not knowing what to say to Susan either.

“I can’t believe she isn’t answering any of my calls or texts,” Harriet frowned.
“Well, her mum is sick and -”

“Yea, that is just it, isn’t it? Like, I’m sorry, this is a rather dark thing to say or even think, but Marie – I just think she gets it, you know?” Harriet paused, her stance and expression far from poised. Her lower lip budged and folder as she thought, as though she could not decide if it was more appropriate to pout or bite. “I mean, in a way that none of the rest of us can. I’ve long thought, a lot of the reason she and Susan are so close is because they are both constantly confronted with death, like, they both know how to live because their lives have taught them how to grieve and then get on with it. I just … I don’t know what to do. I always figured, I mean, whoever actually lost their legal guardian first, the other would kind of give the rest of us an example to follow, but Marie’s answer, apparently, is to just stay away and I kind of thought – I mean, Susan clearly needs her best friend and I don’t understand -”

“Marie is grounded, and her phone, it’s – like she broke hers and was using her dad’s but he took it back and I’m sure her SIM-card, too, so she can’t just stick it in one of her cousins’ phones to check the socials. And Billy probably has his turned off in the bottom of his rucksack because his little brother’s been acting out and he’s thus been enjoying being the golden boy for once - too much, I think, to care what the rest of us are up to at the risk of incurring the wrath of the old who have to wonder why ‘kids are always on their phone all the time,’” he rolled his eyes, hearing the mock-assessment in his mother’s voice rather than the light Merseyside accent he had been trying to mimic.

This explanation only seemed to fuel Harriet’s anger and indignation, though – Arthur noted, more in the sense of shared injustices than the specific slight Marie’s absence seemed to offer everyone in their circle. “Isn’t literally everyone in the family in a profession where they are constantly calling or texting someone -” she began to complain, shifting her hands to her hips. Harriet’s father was a banker, the kind who worked long hours in the company of loose women and her mother’s only contribution to society was commercial, namely, she shopped labels and looked cheaper for it. The pair was probably always on their phones (never to each other) and, like all parents, probably had the audacity to tell Harriet to put hers away on the odd evening in which they shared in one another’s company though they themselves did not adhere to the same standard of ‘manners’.

“It isn’t hypocrisy on their part if money is being made,” Arthur answered with a scoff. Technically, his mother had taken his mobile as well, but had been using it for Google Maps – her own occupied by the cabal that employed her. Mrs Wellesley was a government translator who worked primarily in Brussels (but occasionally found extra work scripting the odd, tacky crime drama for the BBC if location was being established by having the actors switch between English and Irish Gaelic – an ‘educational initiative’ for, as his mum put it, should an Englishman throw around an awkward ‘Pionta Guinness, le do thoil’ in a local pub not catering to tourists, it might well help if his mates are later able to describe where and how they found his corpse.)

Most of her work, it seemed, was centred around what ought not be said. Anne Wellesley earned enough in the EU to support the family, but to make sure they could retain their living standards on a single source of income, worked out small ways with her colleagues to prolong each debate – the body was corrupt enough to get twenty-seven member states to agree to measures that met no one’s national interest, so she needed to be creative to throw things off-course.

‘And Brexit?’ he asked her once. ‘Brexit is an absolute gold-mine,’ she had answered. But Arthur knew that natural resources eventually ran out and as he rode back to London with his mother (who, upon meeting ‘Sir Banastre’ was in the process of ring up a few contacts abroad on an Eater weekend, gleefully colluding with an intent to exploit), he could not help but to take the pessimists’ point of view – however she played it, his mum would sooner than later be out of work (regardless of how much she could squeeze out of the debates in the short-term) and wondered if this was not allegorical of the entire situation in which the nation found itself.
His phone blinked and occasionally buzzed on the dash, and when his mum seemed herself too preoccupied with the end of days to care if he reached for it, he did –

- to devastating news. He asked if she would pull over, if he could drive and when she told him ‘No,’ he told her a great many things until she relented. He dropped her off, carried the luggage up into the flat and then took the tube to Susan’s. (Whatever Brexit ultimately meant to British industry – auto or otherwise - Arthur was reluctant to park a Prius among his schoolmates’ Bentleys and Aston Martins.)

“Anyway, to that end, wouldn’t Sir Banastre know?” Harriet continued in a tone Arthur was not certain if he was meant to take as rhetorical. “Like wouldn’t he have been informed by now and at least given Marie her phone back?”

“About Nan? I don’t see why,” he answered honestly, as many personal and political problems he otherwise had with the man Marie’s frenemy took umbrage with.

“He’s an MP,” Harriet said matter-of-factly. “Susan’s uncle Cholmondeley is about to be the subject of an absolute media shitshow for having hired those illegals and will probably lose his chair -”

“If the story gets out, which it hasn’t yet. And anyway, Tarleton isn’t on Ways and Means or in the Shadow Cabinet, so I don’t think he’d be among the first they would notify.”

“You are probably right,” Harriet shrugged. Arthur saw that he had in some way disappointed her and offered his water bottle again, which the girl took but did not drink from.

Maybe they were all better with commotion at hand, with facts that could be freely voiced in like-company rather than dark hypotheticals that tended to take the mind when loss was met with moments of silence.

Susan Bertie had awoken that morning to a mixture of the two extremes. Her grandmother has passed away in the early hours and had been left to lie un-mourned; Nan’s nurses and several other members of staff – kitchen, household, Susan’s own governess - stripping the stately home of small valuables, intending to be long gone by the time the coroner was called in. At first, not noticing anything amiss, Susan had gone in to her grandmother’s chambers as she always and kissed her forehead to find it cold. She screamed, which prompted someone to lock her into the room. After an hour of banging for someone to let her out (eventually landing on the assumption that everyone had left her) Susan found herself with the uncomfortable task of moving her beloved grandmother’s corpse, tying together sheets stained with the fluids a human body empties when it ceases to function and had so escaped in her night-dress from a second storey window, from where she walked down to the corner police station to report the incident.

It worked out that Susan had had a number of (however justifiable) hysterical incidences at the same address, so when her aunt and uncle were phoned to the crime scene and said that they did not want to press charges, the police were relieved.

Susan loudly accused the couple of child abuse, criminal neglect, and when these were met with a cold statement about their having employed women without papers at under-working wage, struggling as they were, waiting for the old woman to die that they might come into her inheritance, Susan swore to them that they would never see a cent and put in a call to a former DI who had since gone into accounting. Ferguson then reached out to a lawyer he loosely knew and had seen recently in his city (who, for her part, put in a call to Child Services and was supposedly flying down from Edinburgh to see the matter sorted.)

After all this had transpired, Susan collapsed back into her bed, cried to her cat and texted her friends
what had happened, her voice too raw to make any further phone calls. When they came one by one, they helped her clean – which Susan had decided had to be done as she no longer maids to do these things, stating after some time that she needed to take an inventory of all that was missing as per the ex-inspector’s instructions. ‘I want my shit back,’ she had said, meaning that she wanted some compensation for the loss of her Nan and the entire illusory life that had been lost long with her. ‘I’ll find it, somehow.’

Knowing Susan, she probably would.

All Arthur could do by the time he got there was offer to get takeaway whilst a few of his schoolmates waited with her for the solicitor and debated between themselves the best time to inform the press, looking online to see when certain measures were up for a vote, which lead to long bouts of silent and the dark thoughts they carried. Maybe there was something beyond ‘manners’ that made parents caution their children against staring at screens in extended company.

Still, he hated that Marie did not have access to hers.

“How did you know?” Harriet asked after a moment. “About Marie being grounded?”

“I am kind of the cause of it,” Arthur admitted, hesitant to go into detail until her recalled something his self-assuming friend had said about desire being driven by envy. “We stole a Ferrari, and were making out as we tried to make our way out of Liverpool, ultimately crashing the thing into city property and finding ourselves in jail with a fee and a citation. I spent the night at her aunt’s country estate thereafter and went with the family on an illegal fox hunt the next day.”

Harriet’s eyes went wide and she reached out for Arthur’s face, “Oh no, were you injured terribly in the accident?” she asked with a coquettish pout.

“It is alright,” Arthur shrugged, giving the beautiful girl a teasing smile that she was quick to return. “I’m on the offs with Kitty and -”

“Are you sure?” Harriet asked, almost purring.

“Yea … she, uh. There was an incident outside her home. It may be over between us, that is how I would up in Liverpool,” he paused, adding “with Marie”, with more empathises than it warranted, seeing how envy worked when it existed between women.

“You didn’t have a concussion or anything then?” she asked, less cute than she had been playing at. “Give me your phone,” she demanded before he could answer. “If you had to spend the night there, I’m sure you or your mum has Sir Banastre’s number saved and I’m going to ring and tell him all that’s gone on here in the past day that Marie can call Susan and say whatever she needs to, whatever might actually help here.”

“Oh my God – I didn’t think -”

“Do boys ever?” Harriet spat. “Phone!”

“I’ll do it,” Arthur offered, adding in hopes of making himself yet-impressive, “We’ve something of a working repertoire, Tarleton and I.”
The shoes were a poor choice.

In all fairness to what had been her favourite pair, the two were about as comfortable as heels came and were, under ordinary circumstance, the perfect accessory for flying – easy to slip on and off in one’s seat and at security checkpoints while being high enough to caution a respectful, reverent distance from those holiday travellers who came to the airport dressed as though they were intent of throwing a middle-school slumber party in flannel bottoms and oversized hoodies, each holding something padded or plush from an overpriced kiosk and something full of saturated fat from another. Mary Woodhull, in comparison, looked like a catalogue model in her designer shades, dark pencil skirt, fitted blazer and six-inch pumps, with the smart-sounding magazines she had packed into her purse, folded in such a fashion that *The Atlantic* and *The Economist* poked out while *In-Touch*, *OK!*, and *Martha Stewart Living* remained hidden.

She had flown first-class due to a scarcity of last-minute seats, and found hers so comfortable as compared to economy that she had forgotten to stand up and walk periodically, causing her feet to swell worse than they otherwise would. An hour outside of the baggage claim, they remained as bloated as they had been when Mary first encountered resistance upon landing, bending her toes around themselves to fit into the heels that they so often and so easily made their home. Mary had no one but herself to blame, but it was the shoes she had been internally cursing for the better part of the past ninety minutes.

Her shoes - and her boyfriend - who either knew better than to ask how her flight had gone or was as surprised to see her as she had been to find him in a Merseyside jail cell and/or on the cover of *The Sun*.

John saw her shifting her weight from one leg to the other and bade her to sit beside him, something Mary refused in order to retain some authority in the situation at hand. In America (The Land of the Free, Home of the Brave, Greatest Country of Earth, and Measure of All Things) attorneys were treated with more basic civility and afforded more comfort – ordinarily, Mary would be directed to an interrogation room and invited to use it as her office. If she knew the orderly, she would be offered a coffee as well. She and her client would then sit across from one another, her first listening to their story and then accessing it, translating it into the language of litigation. She would hold her authoritative position without having to take a literal stand.

Mary Woodhull cursed her shoes. When John asked how she had gotten on in her travels at long last, however, she answered not of her aching soles but of her aching soul. “I realised something during the in-flight film, a few things, really - why I hate the medium, what is wrong with us -”

“Mary -” he began.

“Movies think for you,” she continued, “whereas television invites you into the discourse. Regardless if it is a criminal, political or psychological thriller, a teen drama - which more often than not falls into the latter category - a period piece or some more modern adaptation of a story worth telling, you have to be invested, you have the time to be invested. You can’t create the same connection in two-hours, moreover … in two weekends a month.”

“It won’t be forever,” John said of her current work assignment; a reassurance, an excuse perhaps, that sounded more like a question when it left his lips.

“Won’t it?” she rephrased.

“I never lied to you,” he answered, meeting her gaze with his artic, unblinking gaze. Once, she would have been intimidated being so caught in a stare that spoke to so many accusations.
“You are lying to yourself if you can look at our lives and say that everything is alright,” Mary bit back, holding his glare with one of her own.

John was the first to break.

“What do you think it is that I am trying to do here?” he asked, his eyes fixed downwards.

“Why do you think you needed to fly across the Atlantic to fix a problem you could have just as easily confronted by hoping on the Acela?” Mary returned.

“I didn’t know about Woodhull – you didn’t let me.”

Mary sighed, moved to sit beside him and removed her shoes, stretching her legs and spreading her toes as much as her sheer stockings allowed. “What is there to say? I live with Abe now in the same set up that long fit us both – roommates in a rented space we don’t actually pay for. There is nothing between us now that failed our marriage save for an understanding, something I used to share with you. Before …” she swallowed the sentence and gaged on its sentiment.

“Before what?”

It took her a long while to answer. “Before Jeanne was born and you became so … distant.”

“That is the problem, Mary,” John replied, pressing his thin lips together and inhaling deeply through his long noes. “You don’t know what my mother was like, I see her when I look at my daughters and think – or thought, I thought what if, as a parent, I turned out the same way?”

“So, you were determined to test a hypothesis at the detriment of our entire family?”

“No, I just … I don’t know what I am doing,” he admitted. “Percy … he had the luxury of inventing a past for himself, and I thought that was something I could learn to do, adapt myself around whatever assumptions he made that I might, I mean, at least be able to take my little girl to her dance lessons. But -”

“But?”

“Everything just fell apart.”

“Things don’t ‘just fall apart’, John,” she spat. “That requires some amount of engagement, active or passive.”

“You didn’t tell me about Woodhull,” he accused again.

“You proposed to Effie Gwillim,” she retorted.

It was clear to Mary that John shared her want to scream. Instead, he broke the silence before it truly set with a half-broken confession, muttering, “I … had a conversation with her;” all but under his breath.


“Don’t -”

“I mean it. Were that you showed me such consideration.” She rolled her eyes.

Ignoring the sarcasm, he continued, “Effie, she’s is dating - was dating – my little brother, in secret and um, she happened to show up with him at the Nantabas’ for Easter. It was awkward to say the
least. Then she panicked and ended up inviting Ellie and Ban ‘round, which didn’t end well, and not because of them exactly. My godfather and his wife invited themselves and we told stories about the childhood we shared, and … mine wasn’t half as strange or sad as maybe I needed it to be to justify that which I struggle to confront. I had a talk with Samuel about … well, us and he was of the mind that I ought to propose, and I agree, and I had it in my mind for some time to buy you a ring, so I resolved to do it the next day when the shops opened, we were going downtown anyway – by ‘we’ I mean the whole family: Percy’s adopted parents, uncle and cousin, Effie and the people who raised us both, but he danced you see – ballet, I don’t know if he still does, I know he teaches Marie Robinson sometimes because it helps with her fencing -”

“Where is this going?” Mary interrupted, not from a lack of patience but from a want to understand.

“Nowhere,” John readjusted, straightening his spine as he continued his speech, “We got to the studio, once again, I couldn’t bring myself to climb the stairs, so I left. Just left. Didn’t say anything. Effie came to find me and we spent a few hours in a pub, talking about life, mostly – the things holding us back from making our own more resemble the ones we wish we were leading. She became … quite pushy, that I ought to ask for your hand. If might be worth to mention that she was quite drunk. Any road, while this was going on, she and Percy had a domestic over text, I brought her back to the hotel her aunt and uncle had booked and rode back downtown to buy the ring and some starchy, fatty takeaway to help combat the instantaneous effects of day-drinking. I told her that I was nervous about the proposal, she offered to help me rehearse, then the ring got stuck on her finger shortly before Percy came by to sort things out properly, I suppose, they two broke up, he told me he didn’t want to know me for reasons unrelated to Effie and returned to London to sulk, and in all of this someone at the hotel took the pictures you saw -”

“Leaving to sulk must be a family trait,” Mary observed.

“I was coming back,” John defended. “I had my flight booked and was in boarding when I was arrested for charges I can only attribute to Ellie-fucking-Hewlett -”

Mary shook her head. “It is Tarleton now, her surname, and it is Anna-fucking-Hewlett you’d ought to take issue with. She um … she sorts her problems by deflecting attention as you well know and – we were talking Harry and Meghan at my breakfast table, that is Abe, Joseph, Freddie, Arnold and I .”

“Arnold?” John squinted, turning to face her for the first time since she had sat down.

“Benedict. Freddie came to DC for a gay-rights march or something, was giving me highlights and as he is the only one Arnold trusts his hair to -”

“I don’t see why.”

Mary took a moment to consider the complaint. “I think it is a power-move. In North Korea that particular haircut is a punishable offence – it doesn’t matter. None of this does. The point is, I’d gotten on a plane first thing this morning, you had your phone off, and our friends didn’t want us to miss one another. We – clearly – need to talk. John, I don’t know how to say this, so I just will; I don’t want to marry you. I think … the problems that we have would not be solved by a ring, it might actually make them worse.”

“Is this, are you -” he choked, looking as though she had just ripped away every hope he had ever held. Mary had not realised his intentions towards her had been more than a passing whim, he had phrased it, after all, as being Samuel’s idea. As being Effie’s.

“I think we need to take a step back before even thinking about moving things forward,” she tried to
assure him without further accusation.

“I understand.”

“Do you? John I’m -”

“This cell – this cell, right?” he shook his head. “I was here, or in one like it, same station at least as a boy – with Fabienne Bouchard whose father also could not be reached, and Ban Tarleton, whose father thought that he needed to stay for a few hours longer and have a good think about what he had done wrong. We were in for breaking into one of the local stadiums – and it has become this, kind of lazy punchline in the press that everything Ban’s done in life - good, bad or simply grey – can be attributed to the sentencing we later receive from the FA for the act – a lifetime, nationwide stadium bans that he’s since seen reversed. Like if a player or manager is order to pay a fine for some ultimately negligible offence, they’ll credit him with a possible future in politics – anyway. It is lazy. And its bullocks. And I finally understand the full of my resentment behind all of it.

“We sat here for, hours, three that felt like fifty giving that his Worship left Ban to filibuster, being that he can’t admit fault and can’t contain his thoughts. Any road, by the time we were picked up, Ban had come to the conclusion that he had no great interest in going home, being that he couldn’t bring himself to say sorry to his father and/or David Moyes for trying to make his friend smile when she – Ellie that is – had otherwise been so sad for so long to the point of self-harm. That was what this was about. Always has been, and I just didn’t get it until meeting you and – maybe, maybe misinterpreting the way the mayor ended the conflict or at least the conversation. He said something to the effect of ‘no one cares for motive in the wake of consequence, your problem is that you got caught’ and I … when we first met I wanted to protect you, I wanted everything for you, with you, but after, I think, escaping prosecution – and not through my own genius – I realised that the greatest threat to your well-being was me myself, and I’ve never been able to square that with my desire to be at your side in all things. And I guess that is why, in the end, Ban got to marry his princess, and I’m single. In a jail cell. Again. And in fucking Liverpool at that.”

“I don’t want to break up, John,” Mary said sharply. “I just don’t want to marry you until you find the humility within yourself to understand that your physical presence in my life makes me happy, not sad. That the only threat you pose to me is – this constant fear I carry of losing you to yourself and I have no idea how to deal with it, so I just … I just make sure my own needs and those of my children are met while you are off fighting your internal war. I won’t be in Washington forever, you are right. Jordan and Ben are of course going to win their case against the government and we’ll return to New York in triumph, but where will you be then? Half the time I can’t even reach you -”

“I kissed her,” John gave, burring his face in his palms. “Effie, I more forced myself upon her, it didn’t last long or feel right, I instantly regretted it – she told me off, and I didn’t want to deal with it. So, I turned my phone off. It was a solitary incident and it won’t happen again but – in the interest of honesty -”

“Do you think the truth sets you free or gives me any great comfort?” Mary interrupted. “I’m not the type of woman who would rather be right than be happy, John. I think it’s possible that you are exactly that sort of man though. We can work through the small act of infidelity, rather, we could, if you were not so terribly petty, especially when such allows you to stand in your own way.”

“Mary -”

“Let’s talk about these possession charges,” she straightened. It might well be too late for anything else to be fixed.

“It is a five-hundred-pound fine, Ellie has someone coming with bail. You don’t need to -”
“You think it will take much longer?” Mary asked, eager and impatient.

“I don’t know.”

“Because I spent seven hours on a cross continental flight and I am really up for it. Or maybe I am just too exhausted to fight your inner demons and think the arresting officer and easier target. Or maybe I want to be reminded what it is to fight on the same side as you – regardless, I’m going to get that charge dropped.”

“Are you licenced to solicit in the UK?” he asked, slightly perplexed.

“Do you think that will stop me from winning?” she challenged.

“Look, they just have a way of finding weird back routes to deal with every problem,” Percy said of the Tarletons, Tilly’s tirade in particular. “Should I tip you off to a devious scheme? Off the record until, well – you can send a guy out towards the month’s end.”

“Oh, do enlighten me,” Effie tried to smile. They had been in the truck for the past twenty minutes, underway for over an hour, first stopping at the airport in hopes of collecting Mary Woodhull (whom they had not been able to locate, who, for her part, was neither looking nor waiting for them, not knowing that a ride was coming), when this did not work out (as Effie had had no reason to suspect that it should – she did not know Mary well but she knew her to be a woman, who, like herself liked to get things done in a timely fashion), she climbed back into Percy’s truck with its slightly defeated driver and the two made their way to the police station when Ellie had originally directed them.

As nervous as she had been seeing him after their split, Effie was glad to be alone in Percy’s company. They were not yet friends, but the conversation, generally, had been friendly. Had been, at least until Effie touched on romance. Whatever the direction the Tarletons’ back route would take them, whatever their hidden agenda may be, Percy’s was plain in bring it up:

He did not want to speak of love. He did not want to speak of them.

Effie wished to speak of nothing else. Instead, she did her best to listen.

“You may have noticed this road is in disrepair,” Percy said, swerving slightly for a pothole as though to prove his point. “The problem is, City Council won’t appropriate funding needed for repairs – operating under the statistic that every infrastructure projects costs forty-percent over estimation and takes around two years over deadline. John argues that waiting will only incur a large defect, but maths isn’t enough to persuade his colleagues – something Ban attributes to liberals not understanding numbers.”

“I can see that,” Effie offered vaguely.

“Well, his brother John thinks that the issue in itself is also victim to under-estimation, and by way of bringing the matter back into the centre of debate and raise a bit of cash for the cause besides, John and Mrs Tarleton devised this scheme to start a riot, bound to worsen when the commissioner finds that he providing adequate back-up is impossible in this state of disrepair. You see, Roma is coming to Anfield at the months end and their buss will need to take this route from the airport into the city proper. The representative has arranged for the local orchestra to play the Italian national anthem for the squad and their supports when the plane lands, increasing tensions, giving their fairly recent
failure to qualify for the World Cup for the first time since 1958.”

“Is that coming up soon?” Effie asked. “I thought it wasn’t until 2022.”

“Summer,” Percy replied. “The one you’re thinking of is in Qatar which has a lot of people extremely upset.”

“Oh. Where is this one?”

“Russia.”

“That is almost as evil.”

“Well it is corrupt, as sports often are and politics is on a matter of principle. Anyway, the plan is to upset the Italians to the point of making them keen on a brawl, meet them with a number of rallied up locals and let them have at it – here, where police will have problems trying to control the riot due to the state of the roads. Mrs Tarleton has all of this pre-coordinated with her men and her equivalent on the other side of the street. Someone is bound to get injured and roadworks will then be demanded – and apparently this is just how infrastructure projects find approval in Liverpool. People will complain about disrepair but organizing outrage over such matters is damn near impossible unless it is tied to something a decent percent of the populations considers essential to their sense of identity.”

“There is some dark ingenuity there.”

Percy shook his head. “I’m so glad I won’t long work for these people. They are fine, I mean, when not furthering their own agenda by exploiting something seemingly unrelated – but, yeah, I mean, Ban at least operates the same way in his personal dealings. I suspect they all do. I suspect Mrs Tarleton wants something form somewhere else and thought the quickest way to get it was to caution you about where to centre your ‘story’ – because you realise, it is not true. That you let a man play the lead, I mean. The whole time we were seeing one another … you hardly acknowledged me.”

“I’m something of a public figure,” Effie replied. “I thought I liked privacy.”

“I think you were embarrassed. It is okay. I don’t fit into a role made for my biological brother, I’m not meant to and it took me too long to realise that much.”

She found the accusation unfair. “Was I just a bi-product of your wanting to understand where you came from?”

“I know where I came from,” Percy dismissed. “If think if we had met in any kind of constellation in which I was not trying to live to someone else’s standard and you weren’t trying to relive the past with someone bearing a loose physical resemblance to a man who abandoned you in your darkest hour, things might have worked out between us.”

“Did you mean it when you said you loved me?”

“Is that the sort of thing anyone would lie about?”

“We could still make things work .-”

“Why?” he knitted his brow in anger though his tone remained level. “Effie – I can’t give you exactly what it is you are after; at least not long term, and I can’t help to think we’re already played-out. It was fun when it was a secret, for a while, but I wanted – I guess we both wanted more out of it. In the end though, my concept ‘normal’ and yours have no relation to one another. I wanted you to meet my parents, to contend with the conflicts inherent in any courtship together as they arose –
but you? You wanted the bold face – the tantalizing scandal and the interest of perfect strangers. You wanted to fight with Ellie if only for the fact that it had been a few weeks since your last big blow-up at each other, you wanted to use me as a weapon against John who hurt you in the past, you wanted – maybe - to piss off your aunt, showing up with someone from the middle-classes; essentially, you wanted to hurt people who love you for the sake of a headline – and not even your own. It is fair … maybe. When I first started working for the Hewletts, I imagined it would be fantastic to operate in their inner circles, but it is just a phantasy – it is just saying ‘better to create canon fodder of people keen on open conflict than to wait for a more fatal set of casualties to occur organically in commute and commerce, to front a smaller bill with short-lived but high strung public support.’ And the thing is … I think you know this, that you have always know this but you still want to be as big a part of it in the public eye as a number of your friends, John included .”

“How dare you tell me what I want as though you, so happy to break my heart, now have any right to it!” Effie shouted, abandoning her better upbringing in hopes of making herself heard. “I want to be with you, Percy – but the fact of the matter is that there are and will always be other people in my life who sometimes – however much it may inconvenience you, or me – are just going to need the sort of help I can provide, and I mean honestly, I ask the same of them, and so do you, and so does everyone.

“John and I admittedly share a strange, sordid history, but one that only affects our present insofar as that we understand one another. For crying out loud, we are practically siblings and I think you just can’t take my occupying the role in his life that you had long rather hoped to.

“This whole time, all I was doing was trying to help him sort out the sort of problems with Mary I blindly thought you and I didn’t share … but you know, like it or not, maybe we are all predestined to live up to our names in some miserable fashion. Ellie was born into titles and illicit enterprise, Ban shares the same good intentions and serpentine means of achievement as his siblings and forefathers, I inherited my father’s legacy at birth and my aunt’s talents towards situational exploitation and extortion in upbringing, and the Simcoes, it would seem think that they can only solve their problems by eliminating themselves from the equation. Maybe liberals really can’t do maths,” she continued to rant, “so a quick lesson for you – you don’t cancel out the variable you are trying to solve for, and you can’t keep everything in brackets. You want to study archaeology again and you want to do it in Leicester – fine. Wonderful even. I support that, and I support you, but I fail to see how that eliminates me, or John – or whatever else it is you think you have a problem with. If you leave, like this, your problems are only going to persist though your life, though every interaction and relationship and end thereof.”

“I’m not a Simcoe -” Percy insisted through a clenched jaw that itself challenged this assertion.

“Good,” Effie snorted. “Then be a Nantaba. Be open but cautious, be kind but unable to back down or give in. I love you Percy, and that is what I love about you and I know you love me, too, otherwise you wouldn’t have driven back to my hotel in Leicester before Ellie told you I was in Liverpool. You wouldn’t have let me come with you to the station and you wouldn’t,” she paused. “I would, you know, follow you to your hometown, at least when we were free. We would phone and Skype and holiday together – it wouldn’t be that much different than before, excepting the fact the people would know and from my personal expertise on all such matters, it is only ‘normal’ that they would find out, just like it is only normal that our families will occasionally come to blows and we will occasionally come to blows with each other. Isn’t it at least worth it to try?”

With this the car pulled to a stop. Effie felt a rush of romance until she felt the vehicle shift into reverse as Percy moved to park it, realising they had reached the station. “Let’s sort this first,” he said, his eyes crossing the illuminated sign before falling into hers. The blue light of the city street lamps gave his eyes a depth she had not before seen, something taken from her almost too fast when
they suddenly shut as he leaned in to art her lips with his own, forcing Effie to forget the size of the world and the scope of its problems in the same instant. She did not know how long their tongues remained intertwined but by the time Percy pulled back they had both broken into a light sweat and her cardigan had to be pulled back onto her shoulder, the pair of wrapped running socks she had borrowed from Marisol readjusted in Ellie’s padded push-up, causing Percy to laugh slightly and Effie to slap at him with the same mirth for it. He got out of the car, opened the door for her and offered his arm to help her climb down, wrapping her in it as a shield from the cold evening air as they made their way to the station’s entrance.

Effie had forgotten where they were and what they were meant to be doing entirely until she saw John and Mary standing near the front steps in a similar posture, sharing a cigarette and a smile which was extended their way when Mary waved in greeting.

It found Percy altogether off guard. “John … I, I thought -” he stumbled.

“That I needed to be bailed out?” John snorted. “Hardly. Fact of the matter is, I have an excellent solicitor,” he turned, about to introduce the woman on his right.

“That is the label you are putting on this now? ‘Solicitor’?” Mary scoffed with faux-offence.

“It is the one relevant to this situation,” John defended his chosen label. “Percy, this is Mary Woodhull, my lawyer who saw me let out without bail or charge. Mary, this is Percy Nantaba, a Hewlett associate - I’m assuming, the one who came to spring me now that Ladies Anna and Eleanor have had their spot of amusement in all of this, and Effie, if I’m not mistaken, you two met at the wedding?”

“We did,” Mary said. “Lovely to see you again, Elizabeth.”

“Lovely to see you as well,” Effie returned. Mary’s smile seemed tight but well-intentioned. Expecting she knew about what had happened between her and John earlier, Effie did her best to show the woman the same curtesy she was (perhaps unduly) offered.

“And we did that with minimal levels of passive aggression,” John winked at Percy in an aside.

“While I can well imagine that Effie no longer want to see another drop of alcohol in her life and that Mary is exhausted from her flight, I think some food and a few pints could well help in keeping things that way,” Percy returned. “You guys up for it?” he asked. “Diner and drinks on the Hewletts’ dirty money which Ms. Woodhull has been so good as to see were not reinvested into the coffers of a city none of us can well stand?”

“My dear, I thought you would never ask,” Mary replied before glancing down at the ballet-flats Effie wore, eying them with envy. “All things given,” she shifted, “this is probably going to seem a ridiculous ask, but I can’t walk another block in these heels – what are you?” she asked Effie as she sized her up. “A three? Four? Any chance we could trade?"

“Forgive me, I slept poorly,” Ban Tarleton told his beautiful wife of his shortness of temper as he struggled around the bathroom counter they shared, aggravated that she had arranged their toiletries prettily, rather than separately as they were at home, where they shared a bathroom but not a sink; that she had unpacked his at all. It was inconvenient. He was too tired to figure out the French on the various bottles, which cream was meant for his skin- and hair-type, which for hers. “I don’t know
why I went for a turn of phrase,” he self-corrected in a slight daze, over-conscious of his language use as he often was when exhausted. “The adverb implies that I did in fact sleep but that could not be further from the case.”

“Then maybe you should,” Ellie suggested as she continued to add a loose curl to the hair framing her already-made face, her Sunday-hat pinned into place. She, too, had received a call in the early hours and had not gone back to sleep since, but had enough grace and style not to let it show. He had always liked the dress she wore, though its strong tone didn’t fit the season. Then, he realised, he had never seen Ellie or any of her siblings in pastel. He looked at himself in the mirror, wondering if he might change his shirt to match her before church, wondering if his trousers were already ‘too-much.’ He looked again to the small pots for his under-eye cream, hoping, at least, to reduce the black bags that seemed to bruise him. Without his saying a word, Ellie replaced the hot-iron from her hand to its holder, dipped her finger into a small jar and turned to massage it into his unwanted sacks before leaning in with a chaste kiss. “You’re in my way,” she said, though sweetly. “Go get some beauty rest. I have to finish my hair.”

“I can’t I –” he started.

“What argumentation do you imagine will defeat the infinite wisdom of the human body? Turn your phone off, lay down and find rest of let it find you. I’ll make excuses downstairs and at church. You are not driving back today and should you think to do so, I’d not allow you to put Marie and Billy in a vehicle with you behind the wheel at present.”

“You think you have a say?” he challenged, surprised not by her shift in tone but perspective. Ellie, ordinarily, said very little directly where his daughters were concerned.

“When it comes to the safety of children would you wish me to keep silent?”

Ban blinked, not sure if he should smile at this show of what he had longed for from his partner as it came in the form of an attack on his judgement. “You are right . . . of course, you are right,” he said, “I . . . I shouldn’t – since you’ve been notified, I’m sure the press soon will be, and I’ve no intent on offering them a statement,” Ban shifted back to annoyance. “Do you know, that is how Wellesley opened the conversation when he rang – ‘a scandal in the shadow cabinet, labour minister alleged to have employed illegal migrants at rates well below minimum wage to care for dying mother in law and underage niece.’ What the fuck are we teaching our children, Ells? Marie’s best friend was locked in a room with a corpse as her home was robbed bare and we in the governing classes are wont to treat a fifteen-year-old’s trauma as another topic or turn in a fight politics is afraid to have in any meaningful way about Europe? That such is offered in enticement to help convince me give my daughter her new phone to ring her oldest friend when ‘Nan died’ would have well done? It is as though our cultural morals don’t penetrate our rhetoric. I don’t want this politicised, and if any element of it should be – let’s talk about the extent to which this group of children in particular has had to provide for one another’s safety and well-being on various occasions because Kensington doesn’t want to deal with the paperwork.”

“That is what you should say,” Ellie sighed, returning to tending her hair as she lectured, “for if you don’t, they are going to put a microphone in someone else’s face. Corbyn will find a way to control this, I think of that we can all be confident, so go for the gains you can get. Make the independent Britain you seek a place worth living in – ring Effie with an exclusive, buy some good graces with her paper and your shared base, then take a long nap, and when you wake up, we’ll talk about finishing that school of yours.”

“School?” Ban blinked, slightly too tired to fully follow.

“You are upset, first and foremost, because Susan is a minor. That is what it is about half the time
with you, isn’t it?” Ellie returned. “Those cinderblocks your unit left sitting in Iraq? Finish it. Finish it here. Start an after-school programme of sorts, open a free kindergarten in a poor neighbourhood, do what you have to in order to ease your conscious enough that you may close your eyes at night, find or fund an advocacy group for me to raise money for while your work with local on reforming policy. And when you are done with all that, stop dancing around the real issue whilst at the same time faulting your public enemies and people whom you just don’t like for doing the same.”

“What issue?”

“Where Susan is going to stay until this all gets settled in court. We were talking about having another kid, well there you are,” she said as though the matter were plain. “I’ll have Edna do whatever she does with attorneys and archivists to find some familial relation between us and the Berties and, seeing as no sensible judge would allow her aunt and uncle custody at this point -”

“You can’t sue anyone,” Ban interrupted.

“It is an informal agreement among nobles, which I needn’t remind you, no longer am. Come, Ban – why do you suppose I refuse your honorific? Women’s titles are far too ubiquitous, I’m technically ‘Lady’ regardless if I happen to be the daughter of a duke or the wife of some bloke who happened to have been awarded an OBE for, as you so delicately put it, ‘poking fun at LFC’ – in such cases as this, I need some measure of discrepancy to fall back on. Otherwise it could reflect poorly on my sister and brothers, though they claim, though we all do, that we couldn’t give a toss.”

“You are an angle,” he told her, grinning as he realised that he had no real reason to fret over things she did that he did not immediately understand. Ellie planned for scenarios others could not anticipate. It was truly a pity she could not enter politics directly, that she had been unable to pass a physical needed to preform what would have otherwise been a mandatory military conscription, demanded of all nobles who in every other instance were forced to remain neutral. He ran his hand down he back until it found the small of her waist. Still busy with a needless push towards the perfection she already possessed, Ellie did not move to return the embrace but she did not seem bothered by his touch in itself.

“Of vengeance, perhaps,” she shared his smile. “But you, my love, are exhausted. It will be alright. Maybe it will take time for it to feel that way, but we’ve got this, darling. We’ve got this on every level. Let me go downstairs handle it at its most base. Ring Effie and -”

“No,” Ban shook his head. “No, let Marie sort this with her mum. It was wrong of me to try and intervene between them, to think that I now could after ten years of my trying has only made their troubles worse. Stay. Just stay here, with me, at least until I fall asleep.”

“That is a very pretty dress,” her mother said from the open doorway.

“Oh, it is just Asos. Nothing special,” Marie shrugged, forcing a smile as best she could when she turned to meet the woman. She thought to offer a compliment in return, as such was simply done, but before she could bring herself to say ‘Yours is pretty, too,’ (though she had never been keen on Versace and found the print rather too tacky for an Easter Service) Mary saved her from lying by inquiring of Marie’s open suitcase -

“Are you packing?”
“I never unpacked,” the girl answered. “I never do it’s not – it’s nothing to do with you.”

“It never is,” her mother observed.

“You know that is not how I mean it.”

Mary nodded to indicate an understanding that Marie suspected she was only feigning. She walked in, pushed the suitcase slightly aside that she could sit on the edge of the bed and beacon for her to join. Marie complied. Such was simply done. “How are you holding up, kiddo?” her mum asked, coming close to the matter in asking, “How is Susan?”

“I think she is in shock, to be honest,” Marie answered. “I think given the whole of the situation, it was just really hitting her when I rang that her nan is gone -”

“In a way she has been gone for quite some time,” Mary stated. Her airy tone served to anger.

“So have you,” Marie accused, as ladylike as she could manged. She self-consciously uncrossed her ankles, knowing that nobles did not sit so, hoping if she got the posture just right the rest of her attempt to contain her emotions the way her step-mother did so effortlessly would fall easily to her. “You think it will make it easier for me, or maybe for dad if we don’t see you looking sick, but I mean at least Susan could talk to her grandmother until the end,” she continued in a copied, newscaster tone that failed to match the words she spoke. “I can’t talk to you. You are so obsessed with making your death as dramatic and painful as you’ve taken creative pains to portray your life -”

“Marie,” Mary sighed, “it is poetic licence, you have to separate writer from narrative voice -”

“Why? This isn’t an exam. And why do you get licence for everything when all you leave for the rest of us is painful moments preserved in poems? Why don’t you think – why doesn’t anyone thing about life with the intensity that death gets addressed? My friend Arthur – and we are just friends – he doesn’t really have a care for anyone and maybe he is better off for it. His dad died a few years back – I didn’t even know until last night, I just assumed his parents were divorced or something. I asked if he missed him and he said he didn’t know, he missed the institution of having a father, but even then, he barely knew him, and he just didn’t know what to say to Susan, who really only ever had her nan, and then, really only ever had old photos and journals to go on – but how much does that say? Can anyone really express themselves in words? Do you trust that you can? Sometimes I think all I have of you is your songs and poems and you say I need to give you licence and separate the writer from the narrative voice and what does that even leave me with? You want to die, and your going to, and I get the unavoidably of it all, but couldn’t you … can’t you just try? For me, or Dad or Thomas or anyone else you claim to care for but especially for me because I’ve the Junior Olympics in October and then my sweet sixteen a week later, my A-Levels next spring and then I’ll have to write my Uni-applications and essays and it is just like, my life is about to begin. I’m your daughter, how can you not want to be there to help me with it?” Before she had finished, she had burst into tears.

“I do want to help you, Marie,” Mary said as she hugged her with as much force. “Do you want to go back to London to be with your friends today? I talked to Ellie and your Aunt Charlotte - Thomas and I can drive you and Billy back after mass, we will light candles for Nan in the church and then we will spend the rest of the holiday in London instead of leaving for Wales right off – we can go shopping, you and I and Susan if she is up for it, have coffee, I can watch you at practice, whatever you want – or, or I can give you time and space to be with your friend in her hour of need.

“Marie, I feel like I’ve always held you back somehow though it was never my intent. Of course I want you to live, my darling, I want you to live life it its fullest, I want to know everything about whatever you want to tell me, to help you through your challenges rather than … I’ve long been one
for you, haven’t I?”

“I really don’t know what I am going to do without you,” she admitted. I already miss you. I’m so, so sorry that I didn’t call, I -”

“Hey, hey – lets fix that, the missing me part. What do you say? Road trip?” Mary tried to smile.

Marie only nodded as she continued to weep.

They had gotten the room on his name – Nantaba – with which the receptionist greeted him as soon as she saw him, asking if he would like his usual suite. But it was not at ‘his’ room at the historic Titanic Hotel that Percy woke to the sound of his beautiful girlfriend typing away on her slim laptop, covered only by a bedsheet, wearing only a ring.

No. The Stewart Suite was Ellie’s, or was one much like it (as the room he was told in apologetic tones that his former boss liked best was currently occupied by the young Mister Agnelli.)

Even so, the space felt fit for a queen. Effie, he smiled to himself, seemed more than content in it.

All the same, they would leave by ten, driving back to Leicester together with John and Mary to Easter with his parents, with Effie’s Aunt Margaret and Uncle Samuel, to enjoy what remained of the holiday with the understanding a few pints had offered.

John had opened up to him the night before (when the girls had gone off to the toilets, returning with giggles and an unquestioned fabrication about their having been a line, though Percy and his almost-brother had watched as other women entered and left the same lavatory, seeming to have used it to its intended purpose without the complication of other people), speaking honestly about the reasons he had been unable to enter the studio, about other relationships he feared were hindered by his reaction to this trigger. Percy, in turn, had said he should have been more sensitive. John had brushed this off, saying that he should have been more open.

At the end of the pint, it felt as though they had done this all before.

By the end of the evening, however, they both recognised they would never truly be brothers, at least not in a traditional sense.

Effie and John had a sibling relationship that Percy knew he would never share in, much as was coming to enjoy the man’s company, coming to think of him as family again in a very certain sense.

“Sorry love, did I wake you?” Effie purred and she reached over to him, running her fingers lazily through his hair while she continued to type with her non-dominant hand.

“No, no – I’d wanted to get up. What has happened?”

“Same shit as always in Chelsea’s Kensington station,” Effie answered, “same teen-activist, too, except in this incidence she is the one needing basic protection, and I’ve been asked by both Ban and Mary Anne to keep her name out of the news cycle as much as possible. If those two are coming in my inbox independently of one another in complete agreeance over any single-issue, I feel it is within my best interest to oblige. But that is under the fold. Tomorrow’s headline is already on the app in bullet form, billeted as breaking news, with quote-unquote ‘new’ details added every five to
seven minutes,” she said with feigned drama, “as information comes in.”

“What then?”

“You would deny me add revenue?” Effie stuck out her tongue, asking “Have you seen what they want for a cup of tea at this place?”

“I’ll buy you a cuppa,” Percy smiled.

“No, you won’t, not for twenty-one quid you won’t,” she protested.

“I’ll let you work,” he told her, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

“Cholmondeley’s been relieved of his position in the Shadow Cabinet following trafficking, forced labour, and criminal neglect of a child,” Effie finally betrayed, smiling at Percy’s astonished expression before tightening her lips in acknowledgment of the earnest nature of the matter at hand.

“Mary Anne taking this one?” he asked.

“With gusto,” Effie assured him, “especially as it gets her out of poking at lamb carcass at her family’s table. They do that in Scotland. Lamb. I don’t know – I can’t, it is such a cute animal.”

“You’ll eat goat but not lamb?”

“A goat is not a cute animal,” she informed matter-of-factly. “It is a satanic beast that - at least in the only story I’ve ever heard involving a goat – both had opportunity and motive to eat my former ‘favourite’ neighbour and didn’t, and then toppled WAG dominance on popular culture.”


“I know,” Effie snorted.

“You’ll have to explain that in detail some time.”

“I shall,” she smiled with a hint of seduction.

Percy only stretched. “Hey, let me go brush my teeth, freshen up real fast – there is something I need to attend to before we hit the road.”

“Here at the hotel?” Effie asked.

“Yes.”

“Percy,” she pouted, “if you are going downstairs anyway, will you bring be back a cup of tea or have someone bring some up. I’ll make myself decent.”

“I knew this was coming.”

“Shut it!”

They shared a kiss, and after a few more that ended with the assessment that he tasted like ale, Percy found his way into the water closet, brushed his teeth under the shower and put on the suit he had requested from the desk at check in – his own, kept on site for incidences ordinarily more sever, though far, far less crucial – and made his way to the corner accommodation in which he normally slept while in Liverpool.
“Smoke?” he said when John cracked the door open.

“Yea, yea,” the other redhead answered, “let me just, grab my trousers – one minute.”

“You realise this is the lad-version of ‘I have to go to the bathroom’?” Percy overheard Mary laugh, presumably from the bed. “Grab me a coffee while you are out though?”

“You don’t want to try the fancy tea?”

“I’m an American. We celebrate not drinking tea. Leave.”

When John was at last in a state to obey, he whispered to Percy as he shut the door behind him, “Americans ‘celebrate’ by pumping their fists and chanting ‘U-S-A’, but that is how they react to most things. Some times it is hard to tell if one is at a party or a protest.”

“Live sporting event?” Percy suggested.

“That can simultaneously qualify as both. Anyway, how can I be of service?” John smiled in a way that was both friendly and unsettling.

“I hate to ask in such direct terms -” Percy began.

“Don’t trouble yourself with niceties, I prefer confrontation.”

“Alright. How much did you pay for that ring -the one Effie is wearing - and would it be possible to buy it from you seeing as it is not coming off?”

Chapter End Notes

If you clicked the ‘(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)’ link up top without reading that chapter, just hoping I’d continue the same nonsense thread – right, yeah, there is this and it is super, super important:

Jever > (any and every) Kölsch

‘Yay’-ver! And if you do happen to be holidaying in Köln right now (or ever), I can direct you to a pub that has both on tap that you might compare. :)

And here, some substance:

Anne Wellesley (historically speaking) really did do translation work while living in Brussels after her husband’s death.

I don’t speak a word of Irish and found ‘Pionta Guinness, le do thoil’ in a travel guide, printed like this: How To Order A Pint: ‘Pionta Guinness, le do thoil.’ (assuming the traveller is more invested in stout than cider, I guess, and wants to order the most touristy drink while not sounding like a tourist (???) Anyway, I have no idea if that is right – but wouldn’t it be almost better (at least insofar as proving Atty’s point) if it was completely and utterly wrong?

The Acela is Amtrak’s flagship service along the Northeast Corridor (NEC) in the North-eastern United States between Washington, D.C. and Boston – to hear Americans
talk, it also seems to be a catch-all insult for liberal-minded coastal elites, but that is not relevant to the text. Neither is the fact that the name was formed combining ‘acceleration’ and ‘excellence’ but isn’t that just neat? I’m into it.

Percy’s leak about the council taking advantage of predictable misconduct on the part of LFC supporters (and um, bringing the orchestra in to play ‘Il Canto degli Italiani’ at the airport to greet the visiting players in a gesture that might have been better received if the song hadn’t lost its promise of summer airplay) was based on real events, though I doubt it was part of a pre-orCHEstrated (ha!) plan. I really doubt anyone had a think at all around this one.

Jeremy Corbyn is the leader of the Labour Party in the UK. The Shadow Cabinet sounds well … shaaaaaaady, but it is a legitimate feature of the Westminster Parliamentary System, which is composed of around twenty of the Most Senior Opposition Members, tasked with developing alternative policies and holding Government to account.

The Titanic Hotel Liverpool is one of the most gorgeous places one can stay and it is not really all that outrageously priced – except. Except they charge a handsome £21 for tea and biscuits (!!!) I feel like Ribery was left out of the Bayern squad out of the PR concern that he would actually pay that price, make a social media post about it and then make more social media about … rude things. £21 – I’m seriously not making this up. Mad, or?

Anyhow. Thanks for reading. I’ll do my upmost to get the finale up and posted in the next few days (and then – yes, complaints have been noted, I promise I’ll return to the main narrative. XOXO.)

Up Next: 2019
An Answer

Chapter Summary

Easter, a year later

Chapter Notes

It is a quality weekend for cursing the telly, ladies and gents – three derbies in three countries with significant ramifications for the league table, two of which let me down last night (holding out hope for Merseyside today!) So, you’ll forgive me for failing to come on an anecdotal observation to accompany the opener.

Instead, let me just thank everyone who read this story until the end – especially Maryassassina, to whom this work was dedicated, for giving me the original idea, and Reinette de la Saintonge, without whom this ending would not be possible, as she provided the setting. Please, please, please, if you have not already, check out both of these wonderful writers’ libraries! They never cease to inspire me.

And with that, please enjoy the final (short) chapter of Indefinite Articles! (Am I the only one astounded that this is (at time of press) one of the ten longest fics in the Turn fandom? Mad. But good on you for making it this far.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Effie Gwillim looked at her reflection in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door of the room she had all but grown up in, wondering if the dress she had chosen for the occasion was a tad cliché in its colour, not for the event itself but for what she was readying herself to formally announce. White silk with lace-details, knee-length, sleeveless but with a modest neckline, she spun around at thirty the way a girl might, admiring the skirt as it lifted in motion, the inertia that compelled it ever-so-slightly after she herself had stopped, and the grace with which it found its place. From the hallway just beyond this portrait of herself and yet fully part of it, Effie could hear John’s children running amuck as their mother fought against hope to ready the two eldest ready for church whilst her nannies carried the twins back into the nursery, themselves arguing all the while in Caribbean- and school- French over policy measures most engaged with only in passing, which seemed to add to Mary’s aggravation.

Percy, too, began contributing to the immediate problem, legitimising Thomas’ and Jeanne’s fun by joining in, shortly followed by his big brother -

And hers.

Effie had half a mind to enter with them into imaginary battles, staged with pillows and plush-animals, with forts built from sheets and orders from adults existing outside of this world simply ignored. She smiled when she heard Mary surrender at long last with a laugh, the sound her small feet hastening down the hall to join the charge. Effie’s hand was on the door handled but pulled back. Just a moment, she wanted to keep the morning to herself.
She walked around the bedroom of her girlhood, the pink floral wallpaper looking brighter and more vibrant in the morning light. Garish, Effie smiled, recalling how proud her uncle had been when he picked out this particularly tapestry in preparation for when she and her aunt had moved in (as he had all of the other furnishings with a femininity that would have had a certain charm if not for their existing in excess); remembering with affection how flustered he had been when he saw in her face that she did not like it, they way he smiled when she instead hugged him, promising she did, thanking him for his thoughtfulness and generosity. Effie still did not like the paper, though she had come to love it for the fatherly sentiment that lied underneath. She studied some of the pictures, prizes and photographs that had come to adorn the walls since – wondering how much had truly changed in the years since she had lived in this home and how much she had instead come to accept as it was and would always be.

Everything at least felt different now. Sometimes, she was not fully sure how she felt about that fact.

Effie sat down on the edge of her canopy bed, reached her phone from the nightstand and sent a few texts she did not hold out to terribly much hope would reopen a dialogue, happily surprised moments later when her phone vibrated with Ellie’s >>Yourself as well! Give my love to Percy and your families!<< in reply to her own >>Happy Easter! Hope all is well.<<

‘My’, Effie thought. At least it was honest. “My, my, my …” she repeated under her breath.

A year ago, Easter had been marked by too many truths left unsaid, left to assumptions that lead to lies. Since, amends had been made. Family had fallen into familiar patterns. Effie Gwillim was not entirely convinced that her boyfriend’s adoptive mother exactly liked her, nor could she convince Percy that her aunt ‘didn’t mean it that way’, but such was family, and soon, theirs would be permeant.

She had since spent more than her share of weekends in Leicester where Percy had begun his graduate studies, and he at Hembury Fort House for the same reason, having found work-placement at the dig being conducted at the neighbouring Fort itself for which the house was named. Percy now enjoyed his own bedroom in her childhood home – though, Effie consider, ‘enjoyed’ might have been too strong of a verb as he limited his residency to weekends and bad weather. She, too, often stayed with him in his tent when she came to visit, adoring it with sketches and watercolours she made of the site and its artefacts whilst he worked. A few had wound up on the walls of what had long been a guestroom - the best, however, Aunt Margaret insisted in hanging in the drawing room or in Uncle Samuel’s study where unsuspecting visitors were doubtlessly forced to endure a history lecture – either of the area itself or the people who had come to occupy it more recently (John, Percy, herself and the peculiarities that defined them in this narrative - all now seeming normal as Effie had once been assured they would when their saga had settled and passed into myth.)

Both the Simcoe/Woodhulls and Nantabas had spent the previous Christmas at this now-fabled estate, and Effie was half-certain that Zeinab had complained to her husband and anyone else unlucky enough to listen that Easter, therefore, should be held in Leicester (though they did not have the space to accompany everyone in attendance.) She had done the same in December when outside events otherwise cancelled their travel plans – perhaps disappointed that owing to John and Mary needing to fly into the UK to attend a funeral a few days prior, she was being asked to give up a trip to the United States which she had been looking forward too since well before the offer could be made. There would be other chances, Effie was certain. The war could not last forever and even if it should, she could still take Percy’s mother shopping in New York City over a long weekend. Airlines continued to operate in Britain and soon, she would have reason enough to extend such an invitation. In a few minutes, Percy’s mother, father and everyone else at the table would learn that the ring she had had cut off, resized and yet still wore held a significance beyond souvenir.
Effie opened her door when she heard a knock, surprised to find John’s eldest there instead of one of the adults sleeping on the same floor. The little girl fell into a curtsy and told her clumsily in words too large for her little mouth that she was ‘quarterly’ invited to breakfast. Effie smiled and knelt down slightly, running her fingers through Jeanne’s loose, shoulder-length auburn curls, the girl adjusting her headband in reaction, feeling that the pretty black bow remained in the centre.

“Cordially?” Effie asked. “Who taught you that?”


“Cordially,” Jeanne laughed.

“Um-hm,” Effie smiled.

“You have a funny accent, Aunt Effie.”

“Your father shares the same.”

“Cordially,” she repeated again as giggles gave way to resolution. She was silent for a moment, her bright eyes unshifting as she took her time to consider. “Can I say to Jordan that he is my ‘cordial’ if it is meaning friendly? Because he is my friend?”

“You are excited to see him next week, aren’t you?” Effie asked, taking the little girl’s hand as she walked with her down the hall. Jeanne had spoken of little else since arrival. It had been months since Edmund and Anna had been forced to leave the United States, months since Jeanne and Jordan had gotten to play with one another, but the couple had extended and invitation to John and Mary to visit them in Scotland over the course of their trip and an additional fight had been booked for the coming Tuesday. ‘It is not the same with Skype,’ Mary told of the children, ‘not at that age when they don’t really understand what is going on and want only to frolic and play. Can’t do that with a keyboard.’ Effie nodded.

Distance, at any age, had its difficulties.

She missed Percy when they were both working and missed him more when they toasted through a screen, their wine glasses not able to clink. The same was true of Mary Anne who had chosen Edinburgh over London when the Hewletts had retaken residence in the castle, with Ellie (whose position was more precarious) though she still lived in London with the girls and likely would long after they had graduated and moved out, it was difficult for the two of them to meet face to face these days given her husband’s open contempt over the way The Daily Mail had handled his sister-in-law’s brutal murder at the hands of a workers’ union in a short-lived uprising. Though he had since permitted her to interview Marie over the introduction she had written to her mother’s final folio and Susan over an Online Influencer Award she had won with regard to child advocacy, her conversations with the MP remained reduced to short exchanges of information since ‘Executed by FIAT’, since Effie’s ‘I was making a pun, not a point’ and Ban’s, ‘she was in a very literal sense ripped limb for limb over the salary of some footballer. Do you think anyone out there is laughing but you?’ Then, the nature of his work was also far different these days since he had begun flirting with the powers which he had been bestowed but forbidden. The last time he had been at a live match, a proxy-war had broken out in Iberia, seemingly because he so happened to be sitting next to the Spanish king when a shot went off in Scotland. The young officer he had intrusted his phone to for the duration of this unofficial meeting, had, by virtue of giving his name when taking the call, been awarded a field command Ban likely resented him holding. Effie wondered if he still enjoyed
sport at all, if she would ever be allowed the chance to ask.

“Um-hm,” Jeanne answered of her anticipation, sounding unsure, perhaps in reaction to the expression consideration over the distance the past year had defined had lent to Effie’s features. When she smiled, the girl returned it, holding her hand tighter, which filled Effie with a new warmth.

“But cordial,” she felt compelled to correct though she was sure the child would forget the word by the afternoon, “isn’t synonymous in its nominal form. It is like a sweetened medicine, like a liquor.”

“Tylenol?” Jeanne tried. “Mommy takes mine when she has a headache because it tastes like grapes and they don’t do that in the one for grown-ups.”

“Smart lady,” Effie gave.

“English is a weird language,” her niece surmised.

“Well, what do you speak then?”

“American!” the girl laughed. She pulled her hand free and began to run ahead when suddenly - as though reminded of her manners by the length of the stairwell - she stopped and looked back at Effie with wide eyes, suddenly seized by fear. Effie hurried to approach. “Do you think Jordan can still speak American since he has been in Scotland for some months? Do they speak American in Scotland? Do they even speak English?”

“That is a loaded question,” Effie tried to joke. Jeanne, however, looked like she was on the verge of tears. “You understand me when I speak, right?” she asked, kneeling again to meet the girl at eye-level. “And Father? And Mr Hewlett – he is from Scotland, even.”

“Most of the time.”

“Jordan will still sound exactly as you remember him.”

“But I don’t remember!” Jeanne cried, admonishing herself over something as normal as it was not.

“You will,” Effie promised as she lifted the girl into her arms and carried her down the stairs towards the dining room. “Why don’t we ask your father if we can phone him after breakfast – you’ll know him immediately, I promise.”

“Will he remember what I sound like, too, do you think?”

“Think? I know that he will, sweetheart. I’m sure he misses you very, very much.”

Jeanne nodded. “My father says you know everything that happens before it happens. Before everyone else knows. Do you know if this will be over soon – if the Hewletts will get to move back to Setauket?”

Effie bit her lower lip. “I don’t. Should I tell you what I do know? I know that no matter where either of you are living, you and Jordan will still be best friends. Distance isn’t any kind of determinant. Did you know a lot of my friends live in Scotland now, too?”

“Then why do you live here?” Jeanne asked.

“Well, because Percy lives here. Same as your father lives in America, because that is where your mother lives.”

She nodded, her curls bouncing as she continued in surprisingly serious tones, “Then I’ll make sure
to marry him when I grow up so that he will have to move back to America or I’ll have to move here. Do I have to be a princess first?”

“You already are a princess. Every little girl is.”

“What happens when I get older though?”

“You’ll still be a princess if you remember to be generous and kind.”

“Cordially,” Jeanne tried.

“Cordial,” Effie corrected.

“But that means Tylenol,” the girl frowned.

“Sort of, when it is used as a noun. Do you know what a ‘noun’ is?”

“A person, place, or thing!” the kindergartener announced proudly.

“And a verb?”

“It is what you are doing, like ‘talking’, ‘running’, ‘swimming’.”

“Good. Now what about an ‘adverb’?”

“I don’t know,” Jeanne admitted after giving the question a moment of hard thought.

“It is a word that describes a verb – running quickly, inviting cordially.”

“-ly words then?”

“I suppose so,” Effie answered. “And an ‘adjective’, do you know what that is? It is a word that describes a noun. Can you think of an example?”

“A pretty lady. That is you - a very pretty lady. Are you a princess, Aunt Effie?”

“I’m not always that nice, I’m afraid,” she admitted.

“I think you are,” Jeanne argued.

“Should I tell you a little secret?” Effie smiled.

“Um-hm,” the girl awaited eagerly.

“Percy and I are indeed getting married. But shhh! Not everyone knows yet.”

With that she placed Jeanne down on the floor and let her skip off into the dinning hall, where she stopped suddenly to offer ‘Grandfather’ and ‘Grandmother’ a curtsey and thank them for breakfast and their ‘hospital-ally’ (another word, Effie guessed, the girl had almost learned from John), apologising for her arriving ‘tardy-ly’ before running to her parents to explain to them how words worked in English and that Jordan could probably still speak American even though he had been living in Scotland for the past six months, but could they please ring him after church so she could just make sure? John laughed and Mary gave her consent as Effie settled into her place next to Percy, across from the couple.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen Edmund?” Percy asked his almost-brother.
“Not since the funeral,” John answered, clarifying, “His father’s – uncle’s, not Mary Robinson’s. He wasn’t in attendance, not that I expected him to be. Do you still keep in touch with Ellie and Ban?”

“Ellie yes; Ban not so much,” Percy replied. Effie realised he likely spoke to his ‘former’ boss more often than she did, Ellie had, after all, made good on her promise to fund his educational expenses.

“Well, Sir Banastre has been in Spain,” Aunt Margaret dismissed.

“Of all the places for the next war to spring up,” Uncle Samuel murmured, doubtlessly disappointed by Brexit negotiations in the way only ‘Leave’ voters who had cast their ballots in good faith had any real right to be. Effie still did not agree with democracy and wondered that anyone with Sense truly could.

“Well better there than on the boarder,” Margaret returned.

“But how much longer do you think it will be?” Zeinab asked in a sigh.

It took a moment for Effie to realise she was being addressed. “I really could not say, Ma’am. My relations with the Tarletons after the uprising have been … cordial, at best,” she stopped, looked at Jeanne who looked confused, “but, not – not friendly,” she tried to explain to the little girl. “You were right, English is a weird language, or we use it in weird ways.”

“Only for those who are afraid to say what they truly mean,” Aunt Margaret began to argue.

“I really don’t think it is personal anymore;” Mary said sharply, if only to cut the old woman off. “Abe talked to him the Monday before we left and was told to relay his wishes of safe travels to John and myself.”

“He said ‘travel safe’ and being that he was quoting me there, I … I’m rethinking my long-held assessment on Ban’s ability to employ irony,” John sneered.

Effie looked at Percy for help. “Can I just say … and Mary, I mean absolutely no disrespect in this,” her half-secret fiancé broke in, “but given everything that has happened in these past several months, does anyone else here think that Abe Woodhull might well be the world’s worst and simultaneously most effective spy?”

“Yes,” John was quick to agree, holding Percy in his unblinking gaze as conspiracies continued to be suggested. Effie buried her brow in her palms and was caution by her aunt about posture, she looked up just in time to watch everyone else at the table quickly straighten themselves, creating a short symphony with the friction between the fabric of their Sunday’s best against that of their seats.

“To family,” Uncle Samuel offered with a hardy laugh.

“Family!” everyone echoed.

Talk turned to Brexit, to the Scottish Ascension, to young Wellesley’s most recent field victory, to Dembe’s thesis, to Dembe’s boyfriend, and then, quite quickly and by the student’s unwillingness to participate in this activity - to politics in Belfast and if Rawdon was truly a viable candidate, back to the possibility of Abe having been the one to alert the press to the John Anderson Affair that ultimately lead to Arnold’s dismissal form his seat at the Pentagon hours before he had planned to make his resignation public.

“The memo was signed Mr. Culper – Culper as in -” Dembe pieced together to John’s clear satisfaction.
“My father is a hero,” Thomas told her defiantly.

“He is a coward,” John mouthed to Percy before agreeing more loudly with his not-quite-step-son’s assessment, apologising if his tone or language suggested otherwise. Thomas did not quite look satisfied. Jeanne whispered to him that in England – words sounded almost the same as they did in America but, actually, they meant very different things.

“Only in politics,” Zeinab said.

“Always in politics,” Margaret agreed.

Samuel rose from his seat at the end of the table, waddled over to the buffet upon which chocolate eggs had been hidden and called the two children over, presenting them each with a treat in coloured foil to their shared delight.

“May we please be excused to go play?” Thomas asked hopefully, his mouth filled with chocolate.

“No – not in those clothes, not before church,” Mary answered. “But we should actually, if we are to make the eleven o’clock service start getting ourselves together.”

“Wait,” Effie said, rising and tapping her glass with a small fork as she did. “There is something, I – we, wanted to tell you all before we left. Something important.” She smiled up at Percy who now stood beside her as he placed his arm around her. Jeanne began to clap, Dembe squealed and both of their respective mother-figures had their handkerchiefs at the ready before Effie and Percy could so much as get the words out.

“I think she will make such a beautiful bride,” Mary said wistfully as she followed behind the newly engaged pair through the dig site after Easter Service, holding her heels in the hand that was not holding his. “It looks kind of like a wedding dress, don’t you think?”

John had not noticed his sort-of-sister, sort-of-sister-in-law was in white until Mary had mentioned it.

“I think the colour would look good on you,” he replied. “Are you certain I can’t get you to change your mind about marriage?”

“Well,” Mary smiled mischievously, “I think you might fare a tad bit better in the debate if you are determined to have it here where I, as you have previously pointed out, am not licenced to practice law.”

“Mary Woodhull -” John began.

“Yes,” she answered almost sharply.

John frowned. “You didn’t let me -”

“I don’t want you taking a knee, not here – I’d never get the stains out,” Mary said, shaking her head. “I’m just going to cut my losses when it comes to Thomas’ shorts and Jeanne’s dress as well – they will both have grown out of them soon, anyway -”

“I’m asking you to marry me and you are talking about laundry?” he blinked. Mary moved to embrace him.
“John,” she purred. “I love it when you read me poetry in the morning while I am having my coffee, I love all of the romantic notions growing up around great literature has lent your active mind, but tell me, honestly – what exactly do you think married life is?”

“Is that still a ‘yes’?” he smiled, lifting her to eye level.

“It is,” she answered as he began to spin her round in celebration of a single word that meant so much.

Chapter End Notes

So, it works out that this chapter is set a few months after ‘Hide and Sequel’ begins, and, while there were several allusions to historical events that will play out more prominently in this modern setting sooner than you might suspect (for H+S will conclude in the next months as well), I’m going to leave such items as workers’ uprisings, Wellesley’s tactics, Tarleton’s stint in Spain, Rawdon’s candidacy, and that mention of one ‘John Anderson’ proving Arnold’s ultimate fall open for now, and just leave you guessing about everything implied about Scotland until we get there in Hide and Seek. If you read both, you’ll thank me for this later, if not, I still think this is a good way for us to part, happy endings and all that –

And Happy (early, or very, very late) Easter, everyone! Thank you all so much for reading!

Yours faithfully,

Tav

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