Summary

Harry is a veterinary nurse, a part-time baker, and a terrible journalist.

Nick just wants to write his autobiography and get a selfie with a famous cow, but a series of chance encounters leads to his life spiralling into control.

Notes

Quick note about the tags: I've made this look really heavy, and it does touch on those issues, but it's mostly just pissing about in the country with a side of introspection. If you want more info or just to say hello in general come find me on Tumblr (there's also a tag for this fic where you'll find pics, art, the playlist for it and stuff).

Thank you to my Twitter pals for the conversation that spawned this and to S for the comma-herding <3.
The truth is I always wanted a book on the Best Sellers shelf at WH Smiths with my face on it. When I was eleven or twelve, I’d sit in my room and doodle the cover, come up with imaginary titles and some blurb from David Beckham about how much he enjoyed it. I concocted this fantasy life and told it to myself over and over as I fell asleep every night. I picked people out of the paper and cast them as my friends, and they fit perfectly with this version of me where I was older, slimmer, better looking, where I’d stuffed the holes in my personality with the ability to talk to anyone and make them laugh a little bit. Honestly don’t remember stopping writing it. Maybe I didn’t, maybe I became a perpetual work in progress, an ever-swelling collection of anecdotes wrapped in slightly dry freckled skin.

But at some point all the stories, they trickled through my fingers like face powder and made a mess of my life like it was black jeans.

A Grim Life

In the Nick of Time

They were my front-runners, back in my bedroom, for a title. Let’s see if either actually sticks.

~*~

Nick’s bones shake inside his hands, make him really aware of how many of them there are, how easily they could judder into each other in ways that would go against everything he learnt in Biology. He presses his palms against the arch of the steering wheel, breath hard and lumpy in his nose.

“Nearly there,” he tells Pig, even though she’s been asleep since they peeled off the motorway and onto roads edged in jagged stone. His voice echoing off the windshield makes him feel even more alone than he had in his living room, surrounded by bags and resolve.

London jangles at the back of his head, like a woman with too much jewellery loudly wrapping a friend in a hug that lingers too long and turns into nothing but cloying perfume. He hits the button for the window and cold air rushes in, ruffling his hair.

He tells himself that’s better, but it isn’t. Not really.

The front of the house looks like it was stolen from a church: a grandiose wooden door with a point at the top and a steeple of stone roof above. Five bedrooms the place has, dates back centuries, apparently. Nick pulls up on the drive; the engine dies, and he thinks, really thinks, about not getting out. Where would he end up if he just kept on driving? Scotland? He’s never been there, not to really have a look around and get to know, and maybe if he went on and on and on through the wilderness he’d find the kind of peace that sits on the faces of people who get road trip montages in films. It’s supposed to be pretty, isn’t it, if you go right up past Fort William to where the sun sets at three in the afternoon and there’s nothing but sheep and people who hate the English. Suppose there might be sheep and people to loathe him for no particular reason here too, though, and it’s much closer. He
fumbles with the door handle and steps out, night whooshing in even though it’s barely gone six o’clock.

Pig barks and scrambles over the central console, leaps down to join him. Her face lights up when she sees the expanse of garden, the way there’s nothing between it and the landscape except a fence that looks disturbingly close to the artfully rickety ones stage cows stand behind on Countryfile.

“We’ll go’n have a little explore in a bit, yeah?”

Her tail goes double-time and Nick rubs at his own elbows through his jumper. If he can make her happy by being here, that’s one thing, isn’t it?

The keys are — as promised — in the plant pot next to the door and guarded by a miniature fir that’s gone all brown and dead down one side. Makes Nick feel like some kind of baron, hearing the thunk of the mechanism and twisting the chunky knob, stepping into what’s probably described as a vestibule where the coats and boots and umbrellas live just off the lounge. It’s massive — bigger than it looked in the pictures — ceiling vaulted like a village hall or something from ye olde films about a caring family of ghouls.

He hauls his bags and assorted other things he’d thought vital for this mission inside one by one, drops them onto and then around the sofa closest to the door. On the other side of the room there’s a candle-littered fireplace washed over by the time he went away to Wales with his friends. Impressed them all, he did, with his ability to use a log burner. It’s not really cold enough to need it but he goes over and pokes at its blackened front anyway, muttering to himself about kindling and finding enough wood to see him through the next few weeks, maybe doing it Neanderthal style and picking a tree to chop up himself. Not in these jeans, though, obviously.

Pig digs on the rug, tail thunking against the burgundy velour of the sofa arm and sending up plumes of fibre and dust.

“You want to unpack or go for a walk?” Nick says. The tail goes twice as fast as before. “Thought so. Come on, then,” he says, and grabs her lead from the pocket of the coat he abandoned on the wingback chair.

They cross the shallow road and Pig darts through a hole in the dry stonewall to race into the wood. The wind seems to whip up by some internal decree specifically to blow leaves about the feet of the trees and as he walks, Nick releases wafts of sweet decaying foliage and moss, his own breath only not cacophonous against the quiet because Pig’s snuffling and snorting as she weaves her way between chunks of root and mounds of twig.

He keeps close to the slug trail of dirt pretending to be a path in the hope it’ll help him find his way back, eyes the gaps between each oak and horse chestnut expecting to see a shoulder or the angles of a face appear, flinching when they don’t as much as if someone were actually there. He should’ve brought his coat. He picks up the pace thinking to warm up a bit, even though his heart’s already doing a passable impression of the dinosaur approach in *Jurassic Park*.

The path winds past a barn that’s mostly holes and piles of old red brick with a rotting For Sale sign outside. It’s like something from one of those property shows he used to watch at midnight, where Kirsty drags people round talking about potential and painting a life full of dinners and friends and children that will probably never exist. He can almost see it through the grimy, broken window, the lie of a future the right person could sell to someone who still had hope in such things, someone who thought with enough love, anything could be restored. *It’s a fucking cow shed*, he used to shout at the TV, while mentally disagreeing about the perfect place for a bathroom and arranging his things on the wall.
Pig drags him through bracken that nips through the holes in his jeans and over fallen leaves that are probably every colour but green, cast ashen in the lack of light. They come to a little winding stream where water tinkles over cobbled pebbles and sticks tangle in the reeds and Nick’s a quarter of a way through telling himself how peaceful it is when a bird flutters and a stick cracks and someone’s panting in the dark behind him.

“Shitting — ”

He pivots, hands raised. He’s going to get beaten to death with a log and left to rot and Pig’ll have to eat him because she doesn’t know what else to do and —

A jogger appears through an arch of silver birches that’ve fallen together to make an entangled clutch of a canopy, neon hoodie swishing with the movement of his elbows. He waves, tosses out a low, breathy, “Evening,” and carries on, his ponytail bopping on the back of his head.

Woozy behind his eyeballs, Nick grabs the nearest tree. Inside his eyelids is a new world that’s mostly purple splurges and splodges jostling for position and he feels, inexplicably, like he’s upside down. He rests there a moment reassuring himself that he’s not. It’s probably just because he hasn’t eaten; the sandwiches in the service station looked dodgy and there was too long a line at Costa for him to bother with. Once he goes back and has a little sit down, everything will be fine.

He opens his eyes and Pig’s in the stream.

“Oh don’t drink the — ” Pig sticks her face in and laps like she’s laughing at him, and Nick sighs at the tree and coils her lead around his hand.

It’s properly dark when they get back, and against the furniture, Pig looks like a ghost weaving her way past the pouf and into the kitchen, beckoning him in to do something useful like see about dinner.

The beams are low in there, fall all the way down from the ceiling to the floor, a wooden skeleton of the original building barely poking through before the modern dining bits take over. Nick fumbles for the light switch, knocking his knuckles against a photo on the wall. It’s the professionally blank but glamorous face of a model or maybe an actress rearranging her hair. It makes him think of some old quote about fixing yourself a drink and putting on lipstick like they’re both armour against the world. Maybe she lived here, once. He blinks in the light and squints at the other end of the room. Maybe it was her who put in that wickedly awful conservatory and chose that grotesquely bland dining table. He opens the kitchen cupboards one after the other while Pig does circuits of his knees. He turns up mismatched china that would be quaint if it didn’t belong to someone else, a handful of glasses from four different sets, and a whisk. In another cupboard a can opener sits atop a range of tins promising everything from chilli to fruit salad and various degrees of rust. Help yourself to anything you find, she said. Didn’t mention most of it was stockpiled during the Cold War.

He contemplates a vegetable soup, rolling the can over in his hand to read the instructions, but he knows what soup is and that it’ll definitely require working the stove. He glances at it — six burners and a shiny red front. He’s never really got on with an Aga. Last time he encountered one he accidentally tried to do a salmon in the plate warmer — three hours it took him to realise, and by that time, his “date” had already left in a strop.

The fridge hums with impotent malevolence and inside are the promised milk and some cobs, which would’ve been fresh if he’d got here two days ago when he said he would. He reaches for one anyway and levers it into two with a knife from the block on the counter, toses it under the grill and fires the thing up. He goes back to the car to get Pig’s food, which he nestled in the foot well and forgot about, drags it all the way through the house to the utility room. He empties a few handfuls
into a steel bowl that looks as if it might’ve previously been for a horse, does her some water too, and sits on the back step with his bowl of soup and his slightly crusty toast. It’s not the best meal he’s ever had, so he abandons it less than halfway through, has a cigarette under the bountiful light from the conservatory chandelier. Pig eats and then does a lap of the garden, peeing on everything. From the right distance it probably looks as if he’s having a life, thinking about something important or cherishing the freshness of the air, but he’s thinking too much about what he should be thinking, living too consciously these days for it to actually count.

Pig snorts into the potted geraniums by the old wonky greenhouse and trots over. He swipes affectionately at her head, offers her his fingers to bite, and she slobbers on them before slumping against him, one paw cocked up on his knee.

He blows smoke at the garden until there’s nothing left to smoke, stares at a pinprick of light above the hills and wonders if it’s a star or Jupiter.

Exhaustion creeps up his spine one vertebrae at a time, squeezing out the fluid in between each one until it feels like he’s nothing but bone stacked upon bone. Everything can wait, he decides.

“Which bedroom d’you want?” he says. “We got two each, at least. We can use the other one as a dressing room. Always wanted one of those, didn’t you?”

Pig canters up the stairs while he checks all the doors are locked three times. In some fantasy version of this, there’s a phone call from a friend an hour later where they laugh at him for being in bed so early, but there’s less than no signal, so he just tucks himself under an eiderdown that’s green and vaguely flannel-y, and stares at the wall while Pig snores away with the fairies.

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_Middling Slaughter, please drive carefully._

When Nick was told the house was in the middle of nowhere, he thought exaggeration was at play, but it turns out the only civilisation — if you can even call it that — is twenty minutes winding drive in the car away, and even the sat nav is iffy on whether or not it exists. The village is a string of yellowish stone-hewn houses with cats in the window and roses around the door and a tiny cluster of shop fronts with names that aren’t even bad puns. The bakery is just called The Bakery, sits next to The Barber, and even the pub on the corner doesn’t have a lion or a crown on a sign outside, it just has a picture of a couple of pints and the word Welcome swinging in the breeze. He thought, fancifully, there might be the kind of corner shop that’s not on the corner but embodies all the values of one, somewhere he might nip in and become instant best friends with the old lady behind the counter, but The Store is closed and looks as if it might’ve been since the mid-nineties. The Bakery has one of those “back in five” signs on the door and from the look of the place, it seems desperately unlikely he’ll be able to get a green smoothie. He huffs at the malfunctioning sat nav and looks for the most promising route out, but the ancient signpost points in directions there aren’t actual roads and he’s not sure how far the petrol he has left will get him, so he just goes back to the house and cracks open a tin of chickpeas pretending it was what he wanted for breakfast all along.

The sun sets remarkably quickly on the day, before he’s even really done anything except fuss about dividing his clothes in a manner he hopes he’ll still think is logical tomorrow and putting them in two of the wardrobes. He takes Pig for another walk to the stream and back, tells her off for getting muddy footprints on the wooden floor, making a mental note that now, he has to go out tomorrow
and actually locate the supermarket because he needs to find something to clean up with. He makes a cup of chamomile tea for dinner from a dusty bag that might be as old as he is, and curls up with a book he found tucked in the nook of a fireplace that’s about horses and a man named Gerald.

It takes him thirty pages to figure out that Gerald is definitely and tragically gay, that the horses are some kind of metaphor for taming a part of himself he can’t stand to let run free, and he should’ve bloody known it looking at him staring wistfully out across the moors or whatever on the cover with that impeccable blow-out.

“No horses, you hear?” Nick says. “Don’t you let me buy a horse.”

Pig farts in reply and covers her nose with her paw and Nick takes a picture, even though there’s nothing he’ll be able to do with it.

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Someone asked me once — on a really shit first date — what my earliest childhood memory was. I didn’t know how to say I didn’t really have one so I said it was secretly playing dress up as a superhero of indeterminate origin in my mum’s tights and a skirt of my sister’s that I turned into a cape while my brother and supposed keeper was napping off a hangover. He nodded very seriously and said it was probably “very formative” and I realised right then and there that I’m really not the kind of person who could ever fuck a therapist.

I found a photo though, when I decided to do this and got a box of old crap out of my mum’s loft, of me way before that. Huddled over a catalogue, I was, with a crayon.

“What’m I doing?”

“You always used to do that. Scribble every single thing out except the things you wanted. Was a bloody nuisance.”

If I did have a therapist handy, I wonder what they’d make of that, the way I didn’t circle things that appealed to me, I blotted out — obliterated — everything else.

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The sky is grey and low and the muddy footprints have mostly turned to dust and rubbed themselves into non-existence. Still, Nick tears a page from his notebook and writes shopping list at the top. He adds floor cleaner under food. The only thing left in the cupboard is one of those tins of ham with a key on the side and no way has he sunk low enough to consider eating that. Not now the key’s fallen off and his only way in is hacking at it with the whisk and whatever else he might be able to find in the garden. Maybe with a pointy rock he could —

“What are you doing.” Nick rests his elbows on the table, pushes his glasses up to rub at his eyes. His head whirs with Waitrose and the way he used to just pop in, grab himself a dinner in individual packets with instructions on the side and a comforting slogan about what to expect taste-wise. He can do it. He can go to a fucking shop. He puts an impeccable crease down the list, firming it with his
thumbnail, and slips it into his pocket. “Come on, Pig,” he says, in the direction of the open back
door, peers out when she doesn’t come bounding in to find her throwing up in the flower bed on
something orange that was dying anyway. He rolls his eyes. “I told you not to eat so much grass.”

She lopes over when she’s done, sighs down into her dog bed, which is still where Nick left it next
to the sofa at an angle that would be jaunty if he’d done it on purpose. “You staying here, then?”

She doesn’t move when he gets his coat, so he tugs her ears in goodbye and checks his pockets four
times to make sure he’s got all the keys he needs, like he’s forgotten how to leave a house.

He drives carefully through Middling Slaughter; no choice when he’s stuck behind a tractor shedding
straw like a golden retriever losing its coat in spring. He located a shop that looks as if it actually sells
things after just thirty minutes wandering around the garden trying to get enough signal to Google —
turns out all he needed to do was hop onto the fence and turn slightly into the sun, essentially making
a mast of his own head, probably. He got bored before the entire page loaded, but the bit at the top
with the map promised there was even “adequate parking” outside.

The car park turns out to be at an angle so steep it could form part of a diagram on equilateral
triangles, and Nick stops in one of the spaces, not quite trusting the automatic handbrake to actually
hold him in place. He raises a palm at the steering wheel like he’s calming a horse (maybe this is how
Gerald started) before he tentatively opens the door, putting one trainer on the tarmac and fully
expecting the car to roll away from him down the hill and into the Post Office. It doesn’t, and he’s
almost disappointed, heaves himself out of the driving seat and up towards the window, which has
posters boasting about a fete last May and good mousing kittens free to a good home. He takes a
basket from the small stack inside the door, picks up some multi-purpose kitchen cleaner that’s the
same colour as Homer Simpson, a couple of large potatoes he can whack in the oven once he’s
mastered it, a hunk of cheese crowing about being locally cowed, and a box of Coco-Pops. He
nearly topplies the display of fruit and veg turning round to look for almond milk and adds a local
paper that looks like it’s been printed on A4 and hand stapled on his way to the counter in the hope
it’ll stop the woman behind it from scowling at him.

“Morning,” he says.

“Aye.”

Behind her, a radio rattles with the chatter of annoyed folk calling in to whinge at a host who sounds
bored with literally everything. “Anything good on?” Nick says.

“No.” She beeps his food without looking at it or him. “Eleven fifty seven.”

Nick hands a twenty over. “There somewhere I can get a fresh loaf?”

“Bakery, I expect,” she says.

He leaves with the thank you still on his lips, checks his car is still there, and ducks down the road.
He pushes open a chalky white door and the smell is like having two iced buns abruptly shoved up
his nose.

“You’re early, I haven’t quite finished the — ” The guy behind the counter looks up from the ham he
was neatly folding into cobs and blinks. “Oh.” His gaze roves Nick’s hair and yeah, he probably
should’ve washed it or brushed it at least. “You’re not Mr Jacobs.”

“I might be. I might’ve come in disguise.”

“To pick up sandwiches for your sister-in-law’s funeral?”
Nick swallows. “Er — ”

This is what happens anytime he goes without talking to someone for a bit; he completely loses all sense of how to do it without royally fucking it up. He wants to go back and tell every single person who ever called him a motor mouth, ‘see? SEE?! I just somehow deep down sensed this is what would happen.’

“Are you the son?” the guy says, tilting his head to the side and tucking a curl behind his ear. “The one what’s estranged and possibly in Australia?”

“I don’t think so?”

“I think that’s something you would know, probably. It’s quite a long flight.”

The guy meets his eye, keen and slightly mocking. Lashes like a giraffe, he has, eyebrows of the sort that probably require no actual maintenance, and a stare like when you blow a bulb, flick the switch so many times you forget which way is off, stick the new one in and get a blast of 60Watts right in the cornea.

Nick pushes his glasses up his nose and tosses out, “They look nice, anyway,” and points at the row of near-identical ham cobs. “She’d have liked that.”

“She was a vegetarian. Had a heart attack at a protest at the meat packing plant.”

Nick coughs in order to explain away the blush prickling behind his ears and tugs his sleeves down. “Are you only doing funerals today or can I buy something?”

The guy half-smiles in a way that’s practised and professional and says, “Sure. What can I get you?”

“I’ll have one of them — ” Nick waves at the farmhouse loaves making a row of neat topknots on the shelf behind him. They’re not dissimilar to the one on the top of the guy’s head, glossy brown and assembled in a hurry and somehow all the more appealing because of it. “ — and an iced bun, tah.”

“Just the one?”

“Yeah what of it?”

“Nothing.” The guy bags both separately and takes Nick’s money. “Come again,” he says, with vague sarcasm, when Nick pushes the door to leave.

Nick eats the iced bun sitting in the car, rests his head back to make the most of the sugar-carb rush, then drives home and finds Pig has thrown up in both of his favourite shoes and the bed.

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_The Slaughter Regional Argus_ he picked up is, it turns out, impressively out of date, but he doesn’t suppose headlines like _missing cow found_ and _local man’s outrage at small print on coupons_ really need to be topical to be enjoyed. While he waits for the potato he put in the oven to bake, Nick pulls the paper over his laptop and flicks to the entertainment section, where a film he saw at least two months ago has been awarded _a reluctant two and half stars for effort_. Over the page there’s an
actual fucking recipe section on windfall apple pie and an Agony Uncle page, where a gentleman has written in for help with unsociable and worrying incompetence while at karaoke. Nick frowns and reads it twice before moving on to the reply:

Dear P,

This must be very troubling, perhaps it’s even made you quaver — no one wants their focus to be on anything other than hitting the high notes when they’re on a night out with their friends. Singing out for help has been very brave.

There are a number of organisations that might be able to offer you some peace of mind as incompetence is very common, especially for older people while engaging in activities requiring exertion —

“Oh my god,” Nick mutters, “who edits this thing?”

A hacking noise from the rug and Nick looks over to where Pig’s tongue is lolling free of a stretched mouth, her whole body throwing itself into expelling… whatever that is. “Oh Pig, no, not again,” he says, gagging on the smell even before it hits him.

He grimaces his way over to the kitchen towel and tugs nearly half the roll off the spindle, wrapping his hand up in it while she finishes. Kneeling, he scoops up a fetid, warm handful of dog vomit, trying not to picture it squishing between his fingers. He wretches his way over to the bin and dumps it in trying not to look at it. Has to go back, of course, on account of not looking while he scooped either and missing approximately two thirds of it, and by the time he’s done he’s got half the sleeve of his jumper shoved in his mouth and a recoiling stomach. He opens the backdoor for some fresh air and wishes he were the kind of person who thought ahead and always had a can of Febreeze on standby.

“You all right?” he says.

Pig looks up at him with extra-droopy eyes. She sits in front of the oven, swaying slightly, like she can’t quite remember how to hold herself upright.

“Had I better take you to the vet?”

He gives her ten minutes but she just lists down where she is, lying on her side.

He grabs his phone, and heads out into the garden.

The fence he has to stand on to get enough bars digs into his thighs as Nick shifts on it, waving his phone in the air while trying to keep looking at the screen. The page he’s been trying to load finally rolls down, images stranded behind little blue question marks, but enough there for him to copy the phone number he’s after and actually dial it. Stretching up into the air so he doesn’t lose connection, Nick listens as it rings five times, then a slow voice answers.

“Hello, All Creatures Great and Small?”

“Oh, hiya,” Nick says, “I’m calling about my dog. I think I need to make her an appointment.”

“Ok.”

There’s a pause so long Nick lifts his phone away from his head to check the signal hasn’t dropped out. “So… can I?”
“M’just waiting for the diary to load.”

Nick sighs and presses on the new wrinkles that must surely be forming on his forehead.

“‘K, we got next Wednesday four o’clock?”

“Wednesday?”

“Or Friday if that’s — ”

“She’s been puking for days, she could be dead by then.”

“Oh, you didn’t say it was urgent?”

“Well I don’t know it is, do I? I’m not a professional, that’s why I need an appointment, because it might be, it might not be, I don’t know? That’s why I want to see a vet. She might just have the dog equivalent of a hangover but all I can see is piles of sick everywhere, I need a vet opinion before I know whether to be worried or just annoyed.” Nick’s heart booms in his chest and he goes clammy all over all at once. He grips the fence. “Do you think it’s urgent?”

“I didn’t say — ”

“No but you assumed I meant it was? Shit, it is urgent, isn’t it? You’d know, wouldn’t you, because you deal with — wait, is she going to die?”

“Why don’t you bring her in now, if you’re worried.”

“Now? Now now?”

“Just — as soon as you can? Like don’t get into an accident or anything, but I think it might be best if — ”

Nick sprints down the garden towards the house. “I’m on my — ” The line’s nothing but static and truncated syllables. Nick stows his phone between his teeth and grabs his coat, ransacking each pocket in turn. “Where d-fuck — ” He gags on his phone and shoves it in his pocket, finally getting stabbed by his car keys. He chucks his coat on and rummages for Pig’s lead. “Hey, Pig, everything is fine. We’re just going to go for a nice little — ” He scans the room until he finds his house keys where he left them, in the door. “Ok come on — nice little drive nowhere in particular.”

Pig lumbers over tail not even wagging. Nick should’ve known. “I told you not to drink that bloody stream. I bet there’s some kind of poison in it and now you’re going to — ” He hooks the clip for her lead through her collar, screws his eyes closed, and ducks down far enough to press his forehead to the hard curve of the top of her head. “Please be ok. Please, Pig.”

Hurrying out, practically dragging her behind him, Nick opens the passenger door and lifts Pig onto the seat. She regards him with woozy curiosity, one eye falling closed then ratcheting up. He rubs at her muzzle and closes the door, goes round to get in. Nick’s hands shake as he scrawls the address into the sat nav, swearing at how slow it is to turn numbers and letters into a map and arrows that tell him what to do.

“Don’t worry, love,” he says, and pats Pig’s head, “you’re going to be fine.”

He clamps his jaw, biting through the voice in his head that says what if she’s not?

The sun’s dipped behind the hills, casts the sky candyfloss as he pulls off down the lane. With his
teeth almost chattering to keep out the images of Pig prone and unearthly pale, he grimaces against it, and follows the arrows through the village and out the other side, through an endless labyrinth of stone walls that look as if they survived some kind of ancient battle, past fields of crops he probably should know the names of.

“Where the fuck is this turning?”

The roads on the sat nav turn into a blank, grey grid.

“No, no don’t you fucking dare.”

He hammers the button to try and make it come back, to give up some details of the landscape and where he’s supposed to go, looks at Pig where she’s sitting putting a brave face on it on the leather of the seat next to him. He leans over the steering wheel as they chunter to a stop at a cross roads to read the sign for a clue. Middling Slaughter is back the way they’ve come, Whomping straight on but apparently 28 miles away, and another turning that’s not labelled by anything other than an ancient neon paper sign declaring that at some point in either the near past or future there is or was or will be a ploughing contest.

Nick rubs a hand over his stubble, scratching at it while his heart thuds against his stomach and his brain helpfully fast-forwards through some kind of show reel of pets he’s loved who’ve died. He grabs his phone from where it’s resting in the cup holder and thank god, there’s actually signal here. He hits dial.

“All Creatures Great and — ”

“Hi, I’m lost.”

“Are you the vomiting dog?”

“Er — yes? My sat nav conked out on me. I don’t know where to go and she’s really pale.”

“What can you see?”

“Like a signpost thingy says Whomping straight on, 28 miles, and a thing about a ploughing contest and some fields that might be cabbages but I’m not sure.”

“They’re not. Left, go left, we’re another half a mile but you can’t miss us.”

Nick peers over the steering wheel. It doesn’t even really look like a proper road, more a dirt track where the dirt is pebbles of old Tarmac. “Are you sure?”

“I’ll put the kettle on.”

Oh god. If he’s boiling water it must be serious. It’s always serious when people start boiling things and sterilising them. Nick drops his phone into his crotch and hums as he makes the turn so that Pig doesn’t panic, because as long as he stays calm she will too, and what’s more calming than him humming an old rap song he liked when he was twelve and then flooring it?

They both lurch on their seats and the tires skid a bit through the broken Tarmac sprinkles but this is why Nick paid for sport suspension, wasn’t it, so if it ever really mattered he could Lewis Hamilton them out of any situation. Twelve grand extra totally worth it, right here.

Dry stonewall that’s barely keeping itself upright speeds past, backed by various blurry trees and old telephone posts and then, like some kind of beacon to civilisation, a farmhouse with a neat hedge
appears. Nick slows enough to read the sign outside — cattery — then another, gold lettering on red: *All Creatures Great and Small*, an illustration of a cow and a mouse. He sends the drive gravel flying as he pulls up next to a knackered old Range Rover and runs around to Pig’s side of the car, pebbles trying to eat his feet as he hauls the door open and scoops her up.

“Don’t worry Piggy,” he says, slamming the door closed with his foot, “we’re here, you’re going to be fine.”

She struggles in his arms, poor mite, and he practically sprints to the sign indicating which way to reception, careening round the side of the building to where wisteria dangles over everything except a window and a small glass door marked with the opening hours and a phone number for emergencies. He elbows the door but it won’t budge, so he swears at it, juggles Pig until he can reach the handle. No go, so he sort of slaps it with his arse, while Pig nudges his face with her nose — oh god it’s dry, it’s never dry — and whimpers to be put down on all fours.

Out the back a couple of dogs bark and something squawks. Nick shifts to look inside and knocks over a whole row of wellington boots. “Oh for fuck’s — ” He tries to get them back upright with the toe of his trainer, leaning back on the door for support, and that’s it, that’s what he’s doing when someone on the other side turns a key in the lock and opens it. He all but topples in with an armful of mildly pissed off bull terrier, staggers to a halt in a waiting room more like a lounge than anything medical. The pictures on the walls are of all different kinds of animals: a proud Alsatian in a cone, a horse in a cast, a cat with one eye and a toy in its mouth. There are thank you cards pinned to the walls and Christ on a bike made of crackers, Nick hopes he’s not going to be sending one thanking them and saying he knows they did everything they could.

“Found us, then. Hello, what’s your name?”

“Nick.”

The guy’s talking to Pig of course and — when Nick looks at him, it’s — it’s the ham funeral cob guy. The name badge on his green surgical top says Harry but it’s definitely the same face, and this is just what Nick needs, sarcastic twins when his dog is dying.

“Right, Nick,” Harry says to Pig, “let’s get some details and we can see about making you better. Are you registered with us?”

Harry peels up, placid, calming, concerned all at once, and Nick loses it a bit thinking about him handing Nick an urn with all that’s left of her in. He’ll probably say something about heaven and eternal peace and Nick will want to punch him right between his perfect eyebrows. “No — no we’re not, we only got here last week and — Christ, can we do this later when she’s got some medicine or whatever?”

“It’ll only take a moment. Bring her through?” He leads Nick over to a reception desk littered with papers and grabs a chart, attaching it to a clipboard. “So how old is Nick?”

Nick swallows. “No — I’m — I’m Nick, she’s Pig.”

The smile says he thinks Nick might need professional help and it’s probably right because Nick’s heart is going like he’s running a marathon with a hangover and everything feels very very very far away.

“And she’s — ” He tries to do the maths in his head but the more he forces it, the less certain he is. “ — she’s three? I think?”
“And how long as she been vomiting for?”

“Three. Three again. Days.” Nick sways on the spot. The wall’s not where it should be. “I didn’t count, but — lots.”

“Did she eat anything unusual? Chocolate or cut flowers, like..?”

“No, I know not to — ”

Everything is purple.

One arm tightening around Pig, Nick snatches with his free-er hand at the corner of the desk because something’s made his knees go sort of non-existent. His chest’s being jostled from both sides by an elbow and his heart, which is now all pointy and sharp and —

“Ok, let me take her.”

“There’s plants though in the garden and — oh god, she was throwing up green — ”

“I’ve got her, let go.”

The voice is barely there beneath all the purple inside Nick’s head but Pig’s weight is gone.

In snatches, Harry backs off, Pig in his arms.

Nick clings to the desk even though only his fingertips are touching it, eyeballs apparently trying to make a break for it through the back of his skull, and the whole world shrink-wraps around the thunking beat of his heart as if it’s the only thing that exists and isn’t even inside him anymore.

A door opens, closes, Harry saying something about being good.

“Sit — ”

“No, she needs — “

“Sit.”

Nick might cry, it’s right there in his throat, makes his voice come out all croaky and weird. “I can’t let go, I’ll fall over.”

“I got you.”

Hands steady on the arms. They scrunch up his coat, propel Nick back a little way.

“Just nice and easy, there we go.”

Nick’s knees apparently do exist because they hit a chair. He collapses down onto it, drops his head nearly onto his kneecaps, and breathes until the purple slows its throbbing everywhere inside him.

It takes a moment for the floor to come up to meet his ability to look at it, and he stares at it, trying to keep his lungs inflating at a good, even pace, telling himself that he’s fine, he’s going to be fine, and so will Pig, but he doesn’t quite believe it.

“Where’s — ”

“She’s fine. Just take your time.”
Nick nods, all energy to disagree or disbelieve him dissipated. He stays there for what feels like ages, until Harry nudges his shoulder with a glass of water.

“It’s too hot in here,” Nick says, as he takes it.

He chugs half of the water in one go, closing his eyes as purple shadows dart across his retinas, his world spinning inside his head like a snooker ball that’s just taken a glancing whack.

“Take your coat off, yeah?”

Nick shrugs out of it, pushes up the sleeves on his shirt, and as cool races in, the wobbliness wanes. He sips the rest of the water, imagining how he’ll joke his way out of this, but even as he thinks of the lines the energy to deliver them ebbs and the panic about Pig races back.

“Where’s Pig — is she ok — ?”

“She’s fine.” Harry’s sitting on the edge of a coffee table covered in old copies of Heat magazine and pamphlets about worming pills. He leans in with a little professionally soft smile. “How’re you? Any better?”

“Bit.”

“Ok, well, the vet’s ready for you and she’s kind of in a rush but if you need another minute….”

“No, no — ” Nick hauls himself out of the chair, grabs for the wall to steady himself. “I’m fine.”

Harry eyes him dubiously, leads him very slowly around the desk and through a door to a room with a steel table, where Pig’s sitting good as gold by the sink. “I’m so sorry, I’m such — ”

He goes to bend down and violet flashes this time for some variety. Nick tips forward and Harry hooks him under the arm, and pulls him back upright. He leans him gently but firmly against the wall and a poster showing cat intestines.

“Just — stay there yeah?” he says. “Last thing we need’s you whacking your head and getting concussion.” He cracks open the window next to Nick’s head and glances at him. “If you’re going to go again, let me know. Or maybe I should get you a chair — ”

The vet comes in, frizzy hair shoved under a surgical hat with a kitten pattern, and very icy hands when they shake. “Are you quite alright there?” she says, peering at him like she’s about to lift his eyelids up or check his gums.

“Honestly I’ve been better.”

She raises a thin eyebrow. “What happened here, then? Quick as we can,” she says, and Harry lifts Pig onto the table and tells her what Nick’s already told him.

She works Pig over with a stethoscope, peers into her mouth with a torch, tugs at her skin, Harry watching all the time with very alert eyes. She nods when Nick answers her questions, looking at Pig not him, checking various bits of her like she’s measuring her ribs with her fingertips.

“Oh, she’s a bit dehydrated — that’s the main issue. What we’ll do,” she says, kneading the back of Pig’s neck, “is give her an injection to stop the vomiting. Then we’ll give you some pills to take home — couple of days — you can put them in a bit of chicken.”

Nick nods, tries to clamp his brain shut around the words because they’re important, but as soon as
she’s said them, they flitter away like confetti. He’s the worst pet owner ever.

“Is she likely to bite me?”

“No, she’s very good usually.”

“Of course she is,” Harry says, and holds Pig steady while the vet loads a syringe.

Nick should be there, cooing at her that it’ll be all over in a minute, but he can’t quite bear to watch, head too busy with what if the vet got the wrong thing off the shelf, what if she’d had a rough day and misread the amount, what if she’s not a vet at all, just one of those deluded weirdoes you see on telly sometimes who adopt other people’s lives and play pretend.

“Good girl.” Harry smiles at Pig while the vet rubs over the spot where the needle was. “All over.”

Pig’s paws scrabble on the table as Harry lifts her down. She lurches over to Nick and sits on his feet, weight of her against him comforting and awful all at once.

The vet gets a box of pills down and reaches for the scissors. “Nothing to worry about,” she says, and shakes the box, releasing a sheet of them. She snips off a strip and hands them to Harry. “Four days, quarter pill twice a day. Might make her a bit drowsy. Now I really must get over to Brankham.”

Harry nods, wishes her a goodnight, and ducks down to pick up Pig’s lead.

“You need to sit down again,” he says.

Nick does.

He sits in the waiting room with his head on the desk next to a stand of leaflets about lungworm while Harry coaxes the computer into life and Pig puts her chin on his knee. Harry smiles at her and rubs the top of her nose, over the patch of short bristly fur that’s Nick’s favourite. “You’re a big sweetheart aren’t you?” he says.

“Is she going to be all right?” Nick says. His own voice sounds like it’s playing on Voicemail inside his head.

“Right as rain in a few days. What’s the address?”

“I don’t know, it’s this big house with too many bedrooms near a barn.”

“The Old Cottage?”

“Something like that.”

Pursing his lips, Harry hits print. “Cash or card?”

“Whatever.” Nick fumbles for his wallet and holds it out. “Can you just take it?”

Nick hooks his fingers into the back of Pig’s collar. It’s like his brain’s turned into some kind of avant grade rave.

When he comes back, Harry’s got a wax jacket on over his green top and a woolly hat. He tucks Nick’s wallet and a bag with pills in into the inside pocket of Nick’s coat and holds it out for him. “I don’t think you should drive,” he says.
“‘M fine.”

“I’m heading your way anyway, where are the keys?”

Nick flaps a hand because he can’t actually remember so Harry goes through his pockets until he finds them. “Sick,” he says, and there’s no way Nick is letting someone who says ‘sick’ drive his car.

Except he is, because he’s on the backseat, Pig having apparently called shotgun. She’s leaning on the seat staring back at him like he’s the one who needs some kind of greeting card.

The fields spin past. Nick’s head spins with that montage of former pets again. He reaches for her.

“She’s a real vet, right? The vet’s a real vet?”

“What?” Harry glances at him in the mirror.

“Like — she’s not just pretending? She’s got qualifications and — ”

“Her certificate was literally on the wall next to your face. Is this ‘cos I’m the nurse and I’m a bloke?”

Nick tuts. “No, course not. Saw it on telly once, this like doctor who wasn’t a doctor and just enjoyed treating people’s minor ailments because it made him feel better about himself.”

“That’s….” He makes a low whistling noise. “Anyway. She owns like five surgeries and a dairy farm and to be honest a dog with a dodgy tummy is kind of… the not tricky end of the spectrum.”

Nick’s hand falls into his lap and Nick stares at the horizon because once when he was seasick on a ferry someone told him to do that, but it doesn’t help much so he has to close his eyes and forcibly tell himself he’s not going to chuck up in the back of his own car in front of a benevolent stranger.

“What are they?” he says, to take his mind off it.

“What are what?”

“You said they weren’t cabbages. M’curiousnow.”

“Sprouts. They’re sprouts.”

“Look nothing like bloody sprouts.”

“Well… they are?”

Nick swallows the bile rising in his throat. “I hate sprouts.”

The house, pulling up outside it, makes him lurch.

Harry helps Nick with the keys and unlocks the door with the satisfying clunk Nick likes so much, watches as Pig weaves to the sofa and flops down in her dog bed. “So — do you have any medical conditions?” Harry says, tossing it over his shoulder while he gets Pig’s bowl and fills it with water. “Do you want me to get your pills, or — ?”

“‘M fine.”

He must sound reasonably unconvincing because Harry’s face washes with concern. He sets the bowl down near Pig and frowns up at him. “I can ring Doctor Nichols? She’s really nice, she’ll come out.”
Nick uses all the energy he can muster to force a smile. “I’m fine — thanks and everything but I’m ok now. I just — didn’t eat and went funny. Like a nana. Who cares about me — is Pig really going to be all right?”

“She’ll be fine. It’s nothing too serious. Just give her her pills and see if she’ll have a drink.” Harry touches his arm. “And promise me you’ll eat something?” He’s very earnest about it so Nick nods. Harry hovers for a moment, uncertain on the corner of his mouth and between his eyebrows. “Ok,” he says.

He waves at Nick from the drive, and walks across the road with his hands in his pockets, checking back twice before he hops over the low stone wall and disappears between the trees and into darkness.

Nick looks down at his hands.

They’re shaking.

“Just have a little lie down for a bit, maybe, shall we,” Nick says.

He tips back onto the sofa, rearranges to get his feet up on the arm. He stays there until he’s sure he’s not going to fall off, Pig nuzzling at his hand where it’s trailing on the floor until he coaxes her up to join him.

Later — very much later, when Pig’s fallen asleep on the sofa and he thinks he can stand up without toppling straight back over — in his pockets he finds a lollipop with a sticker that says, “for being good,” and the pills.

The potato he put in for dinner is so charred he could draw with it. Nick hacks his way into it anyway, fans away the steam, and burns his lip shovelling it into his mouth.
When I was a kid, I used to get obsessed with really weird things. One week I decided to learn the names of everyone listed in the TV Times as a producer because in my head it was like then, if I ran into them, I’d know they were important and I could try and impress them. Never occurred to me that I was highly unlikely to run into — in a circumstance involving full names — someone who worked on SMTV: Live while I was picking up carrots with my mum in Sainsbury’s Oldham.

Got to be a bit of a habit though and I turned into some kind of credit-spotter — oh it’s him again who did that thing with Phillip Schofield, oh she’s new, how do you pronounce that? Didn’t quite go as far as a notebook and a biro behind my ear but I might as well have.

“If you can learn all that shit why can’t you learn those dates for your History project?” my dad used to say. Or more accurately shout.

I’m still not sure there’s a way to explain to a man like him that Napoleon wasn’t part of my plan, how in my head passing my mock GCSEs was significantly less important than constructing the perfect opener for a conversation with Beryl Vertue at the Post Office.

“It’s just… I don’t fucking care, dad.”

I feel the same way now about things like remembering what I can claim on expenses. He doesn’t get that, either.

“It’s a bloody list. Just bleedin’ learn it, Nick.”

Maybe it’ll be some comfort to him, knowing professional misfortune didn’t befall me because I misfiled a taxi receipt and couldn’t say, when challenged, what happened at the Battle of Trafalgar.

~*~

Nick wakes all at once, bolts upright because there’s no paw resting inconveniently on either his bladder or his sternum. “Pig?”

Flinging the covers off and grabbing his glasses, Nick stumbles out into the hall and down the stairs. “Pig — Pig, where are — ”

She lifts her head from where she’s resting it on the lip of her dog bed and looks at him like he’s actually lost it. He supposes it might be a valid concern, because he’s wearing his pants, glasses, and a jumper in the middle of the lounge and it’s nearly midday. In his defence it’s her fault he didn’t go to bed until gone four; he sat stroking her ribs and telling her to please get better while she stubbornly refused to do it instantly and cease the disaster montage in his head.

“How’re ya then?”

Nick checks each corner of the downstairs for a tell-tale pile of regurgitated bile. There isn’t any so
he refreshes her water bowl, heart squeezing at the splashes all around it, taking it as evidence that she has moved even though she’s currently flopped listless on her blanket.

“We’d better get your medicine sorted, eh?” He pads across to the table and flips over the bag of pills. They’re labelled:

_to settle Pig’s tummy._

_Quarter pill, twice a day with food. Start tomorrow morning._

“Twice a day, quarter pill.”

Nick thumbs at the bag, trying to hold the information in his head, going over it to make sure he’s got it right. The pills are tiny, pink, and octagonal. Quarter. Hmm. He fishes one out with his fingertip and puts it on the chopping board next to what’s left of his dinner while he gets a knife. In two deft movements he doesn’t so much quarter the pill as shatter it, so he divides the powder into four piles and scrapes three of them into an egg cup. “That’s a quarter, right?” He glances at Pig. “How we doing this, then?”

His attempt to get her to just lick the powder off his fingers does not go well. In fact, it goes so badly, she turns around in her bed and refuses to look at him, meaning he has to swivel the entire thing — which upsets her greatly — before trying to force some of the bigger pill bits into her mouth.

Pig jerks her head away indignantly but he manages to get one sizeable shard between her mottled lips. He goes for another and she huffs and the one that was in there lands on the carpet.

Nick picks it up, salvia stringing between his fingers. He sits down on the floor next to her with a sigh. Experimentally he lifts Pig’s lip and presses on the point of her tooth in an attempt to get her to open her mouth. Back in London, the vet showed him how to do this, squeezing the relevant bits of her jaw until she complied, but he always had someone nearby to come and help when he wimped out. “Come on, open up,” he says, and tries pressing harder, wincing at the thought he’ll somehow press too hard and break her.

Her teeth stay clamped and she wrenches away, snorting derisively, turning around again in her bed in disapproval, rumble of a growl in her belly.

“Great. You’ll eat plants that poison you but not medicine?” He pokes at the bits of pill in his hand. The vet’s words about chicken float back in. He hasn’t got any — he could go and buy one but then he’s got to roast it so that’s two hours and she was supposed to have had the pill this morning. “Will you eat them if I put them in some cheese?”

Twenty minutes later, Nick has his answer: it’s a resounding no.

Nick stares at the mushy cheesy pill bits in his palm. “Please just eat them, Pig,” he says, and offers her them, like if he just implores her the right way, she’ll get it.

Pig snorts against his skin and Nick, just a little bit, wants to cry.

“Fine I’ll call the vet like some kind of incompetent.”

He levers himself to his feet using the seat and lurches back to the table where the pills are, one of his feet asleep.

Fuck, he left his phone upstairs and he’ll have to go outside and — like a lightning strike he remembers house phones exist. He looks around and thank god, there is — there’s a manky-looking
white plastic thing on the sideboard. He slides the bag of pills off the table and snatches up the handset, punching in the numbers. It’s different than the one he called yesterday – a mobile. The phone purrs against his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hi it’s — Nick with the vomiting dog?”

There’s a crinkle like shifting fabric. “Oh, how is she?”

“Stubborn. Turns out she’s some kind of wizard at eating round pill bits and spitting them out and I’ve tried everything. Well — not everything. I could put some loud music on, rack it out and see if she’ll snort it.”

“I don’t think that’s, like, a recommended method. I could — I’m in the area, do you want me to stop by?”

“Would you?”

“Sure. Just give me ten.”

Nick hangs up. He stands there for a moment staring at Pig while she sits staring at the wall in a strop, then goes to make himself a coffee in the hope it’ll take his mind off the idea she’s about the keel over in front of him. He’s halfway down it when a car pulls up outside and the bell goes — apparently it’s one of those awful ones that doesn’t just ring, it plays a tune that sounds like the worst kind of bodge-job Christmas carol. It’s still going when he opens the door.

“Hiya, thanks for — ” He looks up as the doorbell noise cuts off midway through a note. “— coming.”

Harry smiles, lopsided. His hair’s spilling out from under a knitted hat in a greyish shade of pink and he’s wearing actual skinny jeans with wellies and a wax jacket.

“This is Basil,” Harry says, gesturing to the dachshund tucked under his elbow. “He likes to eat paper.” Harry’s hand curves right around him, one finger free to tickle his belly. “I’m delivering him back to Mrs Whitstable ‘cos she broke her hip and all her relatives are dickheads.” Harry’s gaze wavers down. “You’re not wearing any trousers. Like legitimately no trousers.”

“I know.”

With a raise of his eyebrows that could either be amusement or derision, he gestures with Basil to the lounge. “Shall I? Will Pig mind a visitor?”

Nick steps aside and Harry toes off his wellies and edges over the floor towards her. He sets Basil down with great care and Basil and Pig set about sniffing each other while Nick shuts the door and rakes up all the bits of partially-dissolved pills from the sofa where he was collecting them. “I don’t know how this is supposed to work. All bitter aren’t they now I’ve broken the coating.”

“This’ll help.” From the inside pocket of his jacket, Harry produces a paper bag that emits wafts of Sunday dinner. “Liberated it from the Bakery.”

“Oh, from your brother?”

“What?” Harry kneels down and lets Pig sniff the bag. Her tail starts wagging and he lifts it out of range. “Oh you like that, do you?”
He breaks off a snicket of chicken, and holds his hand out for the pills.

Nick drops the bits onto his palm. “I’ve lost at least half.”

“Not to worry. Injection did most of it, this is just like a back-up.” Harry works the pill fragments into the chicken, squashing it all up into a ball. “Ok — who wants some chicken?” He breaks off another bit and holds it out, looking between Pig and Basil. “Sit.”

Basil sits.

“There we go,” Harry says, and feeds him the morsel. “Sit, Pig.” Pig looks at him. “Pig, sit.”

Her bum drops onto the floor and Harry feeds her the bit of chicken with the pills in, then fast as anything, he clamps her mouth shut with his fingers over her nose. “Good girl,” he says even as she starts trying to back away from him. “Ok, ok, love.”

It’s like watching a YouTube tutorial on how to feed a dog a tablet, the way he strokes her face and keeps calm even with how startled she looks by this unexpected turn of events. “There’s a good girl,” he says.

He waits for her to swallow before he lets go, feeds her another bit of chicken, and she wags her tail at him before knocking his side with her head. He tugs at the back of her neck. “Is she drinking?”

“Little bit last night. Well — early this morning, really. ‘Bout two she perked up enough to have some.” Harry looks up at him all curious and Nick goes hot all over. “I — stayed up with her for a bit.”

“Been sick again?”

“Not unless she’s done it somewhere super stealthy.”

Harry pinches up some skin on her haunch, watches as it shrinks back. “Bit sorry for herself, still, but — she’ll get over it.” He looks up again. “What about you?”

“Probably will as well, won’t I.”

“I meant — how are you feeling today?”

Nick ruffles his hair and looks away. “Too early to say to be honest. I’m never going to be able to do that what you just did with the pills.”

“Sure you will.” Harry gets to his feet like a teacher who hasn’t had the enthusiasm knocked out of them by the system yet. “Just do chicken, pill chicken, chicken, so she forgets the bit that tasted funny. To be honest I think maybe she’s got a bit stressed and it upset her tummy as much as the plants. Dogs can be like that sometimes, they take their cue from their owner — I’ll pop back if you want with a leaflet on —”

“You saying it’s my fault?”

“I’m saying,” Harry says, “if you chill out a bit, she probably will because you’re obviously —” Behind his eyeballs there’s a careful weighing of words happening as Harry glances at the blackened potato skin still sitting on the chopping board where Nick dropped it last night. Nick shifts his weight and wishes he’d invested the requisite energy in putting his jeans on. “— er —”

“Barking?”
“— still settling. Did you eat your lollipop?” he says.

“No.”

Harry sighs, taps his thigh to summon Basil over, scooping him up. Basil nuzzles Harry’s chest, little feet and tail going, and Nick never could resist a dachshund. He gives his ear a stroke. “What’s up with him, anyway? He just wants a bit of attention or has he got some kind of deficiency?”

Harry meets his eye, quizzical. “You know about dogs?”

“I’m not a complete idiot, despite apparent appearances.”

Harry runs his tongue under his lip like he’s got something caught in his teeth. “Owner’s been bedridden, so. Bored and upset, aren’t you, mate?” Harry lifts Basil up between them to look at him, wrinkling his face when Basil lands a lick on his chin.

“Look out, he wants your face cream for pudding.”

Sniffing a laugh, Harry looks at Nick, assessing something. It takes an age for him to decide to say, “Call me if you need more help tonight, all right?”

Nick nods and Harry starts backing out. He’s almost at the door when he adds, “and eat your fucking lollipop.”

~*~

Nick doesn’t eat the lollipop, but he does call Harry that night. He tries to avoid it but Pig just gets very suspicious of all food he’s trying to feed her and he reckons making her hate Harry rather than him is probably the way to go, long-term.

Of course she doesn’t hate Harry at all, not even when he’s got her between his knees and both hands holding her mouth shut. She gets up right after and one tiny piece of cold chicken later she’s head-butting him like they’re best pals.

“I brought you something,” Harry says. He fishes in his coat pocket and holds out a bottle that looks like some kind of hair serum, only on the label there’s a cartoon outline of a German Shephard. “It’s like Valium for dogs. You spray it ‘round the place and it makes them feel safe.”

“Oh.”

“Works on humans too, a bit, apparently.” His eyes dart down. “Good to see you got the trouser situation under control.”

“I’m making dinner too if you want to give me a medal for achievement.”

“What you having?”

“Potato.”
“Again?”

Nick fiddles with his sleeve; apparently he cares what Harry thinks of his dinner choices because he can’t leave it and he’s adding, “I’m not incinerating this one, though.”

Harry’s mouth quirks up and he meets Nick’s eye. “Tomorrow?” he says. “I can do four thirty or a little after ten.”

“Let’s try ten,” Nick says. “I’ll give you a ring if I don’t need you.”

~*~

Nick does need him. He realises somewhere between Pig snagging the chicken out of the fridge and eating a chunk before he had any chance to go anywhere near the pills and kneeling on the floor with her trapped between his thighs and her growling at him, which leaves him feeling like a giant bastard for upsetting her and prompts him to do another round of the room with the dog Valium spray, reading the instructions to see if he can or should use it under his own tongue like Rescue Remedy.

When Harry knocks on the door, he doesn’t mutter, ‘hallelujah,’ but it’s probably written all over his face so he tries to hide it with a casual, “You want a coffee?” as he lets him in.

“Black no sugar, thanks,” Harry says.

He’s dressed in a waterproof hoodie and very tight leggings, toes off his trainers and leaves them by the front door step. His hair’s snatched back from his face and he sinks down to tickle Pig’s tummy; she has, of course, rolled over for him like she’s forgiven him for today’s indignity before he’s even committed it. “How are we doing this morning, then?”

“Woke me up at four to let her out for a wee.”

“You want me to commiserate or say that’s a good sign for her hydration levels?”

Nick opens the cupboard to get another mug out, sorting through them for one that doesn’t have a dead moth in it. “Both,” he says.

Harry gives Pig the once over while Nick makes him a coffee. He does something like a magic trick for her, only with bits of chicken in both palms and disappearing pills as the finale before he wipes his hands on the sides of his hoodie and takes the mug of coffee. “She seems much brighter.”

“Almost back to normal,” Nick says. “Last night she was a bit grumbly but maybe she was just milking it to get what she wanted on telly.”

“What’s her preference?”

“Autumn Watch.”

“Course.”
“Getting quite attached to the starlings,” Nick says. “Either that or she’s got a crush on Michaela — there’s whimpering and sitting right in front of the screen either way.” At Harry’s smile, Nick goes squiggly in his stomach and Christ, why is he talking about watching nature programmes with his dog like some kind of cartoon spinster? “So this is what you do when you’re not vetting? Go jogging and startle unsuspecting dog-walkers?” Nick says, gesturing to his clothes.

“Yep.” Harry gets to his feet, leans against the table. “Important to keep fit.”

“Never know when you’re going to have to lift a portly labrador or run into a burning building for a chinchilla.”

Harry blows on his coffee. It’s barely even tepid on account of Nick being a bit scared of a whistling kettle that gets hot enough to actually whistle. “Exactly.”

Nick gestures out the window at the hills rolling up to where the blue sky is tracked with white girders of cloud. “Nice day for it, anyway.”

“Come with me, if you want.”

Nick startles. It’s been an age since he actually went to the gym and since he arrived he’s had nothing much to eat besides carbs, but the way Harry nipped past him the other night makes him suspect Harry’s more the type to track his progress on an app than settle for a jog-slash-amble through the trees before stopping for an asthma break. “Love to,” Nick says, and glances at Pig. “But I feel bad leaving her while she’s poorly.”

Harry pokes at the top of his own foot with his toes. “You obviously take really good care of her.”

Nick murmurs noncommittally. Of course he tries, but it’s nothing special, is it, chucking a ball for her twice a day and getting her the fancy food with fourteen kinds of vitamins and supplements in. Harry finishes his coffee and washes the mug, setting it neatly on the side before arranging to come back later. “You sure you don’t want to come?”

“Next time, yeah?” Nick says.

And then Harry’s doing up his trainers and waving, jogging off, vaulting the wall, ponytail bouncing like a rabbit tail as he disappears through the trees.

“Right then,” Nick says.

He’s resolved, apparently, quietly in the back of his head, to do something today, so he opens his laptop. He rests his wrists against the keyboard just to test how it feels, and when it comes, the quickening of his breath isn’t quite as bad as he was expecting. He types two sentences, staring at each letter as it appears on the screen, conscious of his fingers and that he never really learnt to type properly, that they hop across the keyboard quite haphazardly, both little fingers suspended and useless and no doubt impeding his speed.

At the first red squiggle, he stops to look up the word because he’s sure he’s right and the squiggle is not, and when Pig comes over to distract him, he lets her, offers her his fingers to chew and pulls her up onto his knees.
Between the refusal to learn things even though I had a credit-spotter memory and valuing jokes over things like respecting authority, you could say I wasn’t the best student in the world. It’s not that I didn’t take it seriously, more that it never felt especially real. There was a bit of me that always felt like I was being secretly filmed for a reality TV show, so what I looked like and what my reactions appeared to be mattered far more than the business of what my grades were.

I never really knew who to be when there was no one looking.

Sometimes I think that’s why I was so keen to get a dog, because then at least someone always would be.

~*~

The light’s that watery morning kind and Nick flips through the photos on his phone trying to find the ones from a party three years ago with a malfunctioning chocolate fountain, where Rod Stewart showed up in some kind of red satin trouser, slipped in a fondue puddle, and split them right across the arse. He eventually locates them between a night at Alexa’s that resulted in her puking in a salad bowl and pictures he took of a house he thought about buying but ultimately decided against because it was the kind of cavernous where his own loneliness would just echo off the ceiling.

Pigtrots over with her toy banana in her mouth. Harry bought it for her yesterday — apparently it’s got some kind of calming herbs in it — and she drops it on his foot.

“He’s not coming — you’re all better.”

She thunks her tail against the table leg and stares into the garden.

“You wanna go out?”

Pig snuffles. It’s probably a mild complaint about the blackbird that’s just landed on the fence but Nick takes it as a yes anyway. He slips on his coat and grabs Pig’s lead, running through the things he’ll say to Harry if he happens to meet him on a jog.

Outside, it’s a glorious day — not a cloud in the sky but a nip on the air, just the kind of day Nick likes. Back in London he’d have taken Pig to the park then had all his friends over for a roast, poured out wine and stories while they all laughed too long into the evening before reluctantly pulling their boots back on to go home. Over the years the parties got smaller, then swelled with babies, the time he was alone dictated by other people’s schedules sometimes rather than his own choosing, but still, he’s always thought Sunday was the day to surround yourself with company; maybe that’s why churches tried to make it theirs in the first place.

Pig crunches her way through the fallen leaves, stopping every few feet to sniff at something. They find a ring of toadstools — proper red and white spotty ones like out of a children’s book — and
Nick about has a heart attack when he thinks Pig’s eaten one, but it just turns out she was uprooting some moss because she likes to see panic flash across his face.

He tugs her away anyway as a precaution and she weaves through the trees, down past the stream, trots along the bank with him following. They come to a little bridge he hasn’t seen before and clamber over the arch of stone. Through the trees, he spots a little clearing, and then there are houses Nick hadn’t realised were there. A few more steps and it’s apparent it’s not really a clearing so much as a village green. There are other dog walkers around the edges and two kids playing football in the middle. It’s the most life Nick’s seen in ages, and he waves at a man with four spaniels and actually gets a touch of his cap back.

They play there for a bit — the game Pig likes where Nick throws the ball and she bounds after it, catches it, then drops it and waits next to it for him to come and pick it up again — but the rumble of Nick’s stomach pushes him on to explore.

He winds Pig’s lead in and they follow the wavy pavement past a short row of cottages — or what passes for it, a thin strip of not-road, like the ones in Middling Slaughter.

They trot down the street and on the corner, the smell of a roast wafts towards him. The pub responsible for it doesn’t have a name, just a picture of tankards and Welcome in italics. He peers through the window. It’s not exactly heaving — two women in the corner and a guy behind the bar who’s… the same shape as Harry. His worn-out t-shirt clings quite nicely to his chest, muscles in his arm flexing as he tops a drink off with lemonade and sets it on the bar with a grin at the guy who ordered it. Nick’s forming half a thought about the guy from the Bakery when he looks over and waves.

Nick leaps back from the window and Pig takes it as some kind of hint and drags him through the door. “Er — ok then.”

The pub looks like one made by someone going on a textbook. The beams are heavy, dark, and pitted with ancient woodworm holes, and from each one hangs a range of tankards in pewter and brass. There’s a brick fireplace consuming most of one wall and a fire raging while little clusters of tables and comfy seats suggest a home from home. In the corner two old geezers with faces like antique leather handbags are reading different sections of the paper and not talking with half-pints of orangey ale, the whole thing overseen by a woman behind the bar with sleek, newly-blown hair, who’s wiping her hands on a bar towel.

“What can we get you, love?”

Nick points at Pig. “Are we allowed..?”

“ ‘Course. More the merrier.”

“I’ll have a — pint of that then?” Nick says, pointing at the nearest tap.

“Hullo,” Harry-slash-the Bakery brother says.

Nick smiles by way of reply, glancing at his eyebrows and trying to work out which one he is. He comes out through the bar hatch and stoops down to ruffle Pig’s ears. Apparently she’s a better judge of things than he is because she nudges him straight in the throat. “Oh I missed you, yes I did,” he says, which sort of settles it.

“You could’ve told me there was civilization just through the wood — my sat nav’s been sending me miles around the houses.”
“They do that.”

“You work here too?”

“Live here. That’s m’mum, Anne. Mum, this is Nick who I was telling you about.”

The lady behind the bar smiles and pulls on the pump, finishing off the pint with a thick head of foam. She puts it down on the bar in front of him and waves away his question about how much. “Welcome present.” She starts pulling another one and cocks her head at Harry. “Go on,” she says and nods at the two guys in the corner. “I can handle the rush.”

Some kind of conversation that’s entirely conveyed in their impeccable eyebrows flashes between them and ends with Harry widening his eyes at her in some parodied echo of a teenage Jeez you’re so embarrassing.

Nick takes his pint and chooses a seat in the window, wrapping Pig’s lead around the leg of the table and giving her just enough slack so she can drink the water in the ice cream tub next to the fire. “So where’s your brother?” he says as Harry joins him, knocking his knee against Nick’s under the table.

“I haven’t got a brother. I’ve a sister — Gemma?”

“Works in the bakery?”

“No,” Harry says slowly, frowning as he sets his pint down. He sucks the bit he’s spilled off his thumb. “I work in the Bakery. I thought you — we spoke and everything.”

“That was you?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, and slips his thumb out of his mouth.

“Right,” Nick says. “So — you’re the vet, the jogger, the baker, and the barman? Is this some sort of nursery rhyme? If I end up in hospital are you going to pop up there too with a thermometer and a bedpan?”

Harry bites his lip around a grin. “Maybe,” he says. “If you’re lucky.”

Nick’s not really sure what to say to that but Pig finishes her drink and comes over so he fusses with her collar until she turns her back on him in favour of head butting Harry’s knee for attention. “That spray stuff and the banana herbs seem to have done the trick,” Nick says.

“Good.” Harry rolls Pig’s ear through his fingers and makes her smile. “Glad my favourite’s on the mend.”

Nick has never been able to take people going gooey over his pets — for some reason it gets him right in the chest like he’s six and an aunty he doesn’t know very well is fussing with his hair and telling him he’ll be a right heartbreaker, one day. “Bet you say that to all your patients.”

“Even the ones that bite me.”

“That happen a lot?”

“Once or twice a week. Usually it’s my own fault, though.”

“It’s a whatyoucallit — a calling init, working with animals,” Nick says, settling back against some aggressively lumpy stone on the wall.
“Personally I blame *Animal Hospital.***”

“What d’you do, play Trude, bandage up your toys?”

Harry takes a sip of his pint, wiping the foam off his lip with his knuckles. “Got pretty messy when I was trying to recreate the surgeries. Not everyone survived, either. It was — there was some tough times.”

“That why you work at the bakery too? Bit of respite because pastries never die?”

“They go off, though,” Harry says. “If anything that’s sadder.”

Nick stops drinking in question and Harry spreads his hands on the table.

“At least the animals got to live — go outside and play and if they were lucky, they had someone really love them. The pastries, they just sat in the window and no one wanted them and so they just got harder and harder until they were no longer suitable for anybody.”

“Know how they feel,” Nick mutters.

Harry sniffs, and fiddles with the edge of the table. “I’ll only be there another couple of months, though — I got exams and then hopefully I’ll be full time at the surgery.”

“What’s in the exams?” Nick says. “They bring you a cat, like, ‘here, fix it,’ and then it grades you on your bedside manner?”

“What’s with all the questions?”

“Force of habit.”

Harry leans forward, elbows on the table, gaze unavoidable and like staring into the facets of a really shiny diamond. “I think it’s time you let the cat out of the bag about yourself. You’re renting that big house but you don’t work?”

“I’m writing a book,” Nick says.

Technically it’s not a lie, even though mostly what he’s doing is staring at the screen with his own meaninglessness pulsing behind his retina. He braces for Harry to say the thing he’s been expecting because his face — crumpled and defeated — definitely graced the front covers of those magazines in the waiting room, but Harry breaks eye contact.

“That explains it,” Harry says and when Nick lifts an eyebrow in question he adds, “you look like a writer.” Nick’s about to take offence when Harry touches his arm. “Hey — you ever do any, like, journalist stuff?”

“Why?”

“Because I do the newspaper.”

“You do not.”

“I do.”

“You are having me on, Harry,” Nick says, just to see how the word feels on his tongue. “There’s no such thing as a baker barman vet nurse media mogul.”
“I am though,” he says, squeaky with indignation.

“Anne,” Nick says, lifting his voice, “does Harry do the newspaper or is he playing games with me?”

Anne looks over from the nuts she’s arranging in a basket on the back of the bar and says, “I’m very proud of him.”

Harry preens in his seat like a cat getting its ears tickled just the way it likes. “Did you see it yet?”

Nick rolls his eyes. “Read it cover to cover.”

“And?”

“I thought it was very — local.” Pig looks up at him like nice dodge. “If I can offer you some constructive what you call it though, I think whoever does the Agony Uncle bit could do with a dictionary.”

“Oh?”

“Incompetence at karaoke? That’s what my friends accuse me of when I can’t hit the notes and far as I’m aware there’s nothing any GP can do about it.”

“I’ve never been the best at, like, spelling,” Harry says, poking a beermat.

“So journalism was the obvious choice.”

Harry shrugs. “Barbara — who owns the Bakery — she got me into it, wanted us to do the recipe section for, like, advertising? So I took pictures of all the steps and stuff with my phone — and then her husband Bill — have you met him?”

“I’ve met nobody really except you. Maybe everyone is you. Barbara’s a figment of your imagination and that’s you behind the bar in a wig.”

Harry snorts a laugh. “Like in a film.”

“Maybe you murdered everyone and assumed all their identities.”

“That’s — dark and vaguely paranoid.”

“It’s not that paranoid. You’ve access to dangerous medicines, pastries, and booze, and when people start to notice their neighbours dropping like flies, you can publish your own cover up.”

A slow blink later, Harry shakes his head sadly. “And there I was thinking you were going to say something about us being soulmates who keep bumping into each other until we realise the universe is matchmaking us.”

“Yeah let’s go with yours,” Nick says, wrinkling up his nose. “And anyway you’d only end up with a series of mysterious positionings splashed across the front page.”

Harry mumbles a complaint and kicks him under the table.

“Go on,” Nick says. “What were you gonna say about Bill?”

“Bill?” Harry says. “Oh, he runs the camera club. Gave me a proper camera he wasn’t using anymore and for the practise I started taking pictures of this and that for Pat for the actual news bit of
the newspaper — mostly vegetable contests and stuff — and then couple of months back Pat, Pat won the lottery and fuc—” Harry glances at the bar where his mum’s still busy with the dry roasted. “— effed off to Barbados. So I was kind of stuck with it. The entire thing.”

“You felt a moral obligation not to let those vegetable success stories go unreported? Who wouldn’t.”

“You’ll come and help out, then?”

“I never said —”

Harry lifts an eyebrow. “Moral obligation, though.”

It’s a bit like being caught in a butterfly net.

“Is there another lost cow?”

“Come by and see.”

“Is this a wind up?”

“Come by and see,” Harry says. “Friday. Meet me at the Bakery when I finish? At ten? I’ll do us some, like, breakfast rolls or you can have a croissant if you’d rather.”

“Did someone tip you off that carbs are my weakness?”

Harry leans in, fixing Nick with a stare. “Maybe I’ll let you nibble my pan au chocolat,” he says, all deep and rumbly and enticing, hint of a smirk on his mouth. “Or how about a nice warm sausage roll for that big ole mouth of yours?” Harry says. “Fresh from the oven.”

Somehow he makes it sound like the dirtiest thing anyone has ever said. Nick might actually be blushing. “Now you’re just making me hungry.”

“That’s settled, then.” Harry pushes up off his stool. “You want pork or beef?”

“In my sausage roll?”

“For Sunday lunch — you’re staying, right? As, like, a thank you?” He looks like he’ll be mortally offended if Nick says no. Not that Nick has ever said no to a Sunday roast.

“Pork, then.”

“Mum’ll be well pleased someone actually wants some of the gravy.” He turns towards the bar and mutters, “We’ve been making it to dispose of the body parts for weeks….”
They say goodbye well after closing time, Harry hanging off the door frame and Nick hovering on the pavement with Pig tugging on her lead, both of them saying goodnight at least fourteen different ways until not having left yet becomes embarrassing.

Once he’s out of the village, the trees crowd around him in the dark and make his heart race so Nick gets out his phone and flicks on the torch. Pig turns to look at him like she’s judging him so Nick angles it down, as if he’s only trying to make sure he doesn’t trip over a hole and land in the stream. There’s better signal here than in the actual house and, distracted, Nick steps on a twig, rolls slightly and makes the same kind of noise an old woman stepping on dropped lettuce in Sainsbury’s might.

He presses his lips together, thumbs through the messages that’ve been amassing, and hits the button to call Annie, immediately realising that now he’s got the phone to his head, he’s not so much illuminating his way as radiating light out from his ear. He shifts sideways and crab walks, something stabbing him in the leg and pitching him forward. “Oh for fuck’s —”

“Grim?”

Nick catches himself on a tree, hugs it into his shoulder. “Hiaaaaaaaaa.”

“You all right babe?”

“Just a little oops-a-daisy.” He swallows, unable to remember why he called and cursing Harry for not telling him that apparently the local ale is about the same strength as a Long Island Ice Tea. “Youallright?”

“Oh Christ the day I have had. Tom reorganised the entire house when I was away and I cannot find a fucking thing. I had to call him to see where he put my pyjamas and after the insanity that was Ibiza it was the last thing I needed.”

“Ibiza? There was Ibiza?”

“The closing party was — well Heidi chugged an entire bottle of tequila and then thought it would be a good idea to crowd surf, only she’d forgotten we were on a boat, with entirely predictable results. I put it all on Snapchat. What you up to, babe? We miss you.”

“Just settling in. On me way back from the pub, actually.”

“Aimee owes me a fiver then, because she said you’d get bored within a week and come home but I had faith in you, Grim, I said you’d last at least three.”

Nick huffs.

“Four maybe now you’ve found the pub.”

“Don’t get too cocky,” he says, “it might be run by a serial killer who’s drugging the baked goods. Either of you write a get out clause in for that? What happens in the case of my death?”

“I guess we’d both just put our stakes towards your wake.”

“Tah very much. No rescue mission?”

“As if you ever needed anyone’s help.”

Nick murmurs a noncommittal noise into the handset. Pig tugs on her lead and Nick stumbles off his tree and flails out for another one to cling to. The branch he was aiming for comes away his hand.
“Oh bloody —”

“You all right?”

“Yeah just — this country living thing takes a bit of getting used to.” He regards the stick for a moment before discarding it. “Can you just — I don’t know — talk to me while I walk back? I think I had two or three too many.”

And Annie, well, she never had any problem with talking. Nick lets her voice wash over him as he steps over a log with far too grand a stride, and when Nick gets in, he flops down on the sofa and sleeps right through until morning for the first time in about six months.
The first thing I asked on the university open day tour was where the student radio studio was. The guy taking us round didn’t know — he was some history student who considered it all very beneath him — but I dragged my mate all over the campus until we found it, peered through the door like one of them scenes in a film where the lead guy chances upon a secret lair.

It was this tiny little Portacabin and everything in it looked cobbled together. I could just sort of see it, though, how me sitting behind that desk would be the start of the thing I’d always been imagining. Didn’t even really care what course I picked, so when my dad argued about what was sensible and what was a waste of time I let him think I was listening, mentally started packing my old life into bags and planning who I’d be in my new one.

It’s never quite as easy as that — you don’t just show up somewhere and unpack an entire existence the same way you do carefully-chosen outfits that echo who you are now — there’s always bits that stick you can’t shake off. But if you do it often enough, you get really good at it, folding up your life and just starting another one.

Sometimes I wonder though if that’s infinite, or if everyone only gets nine, like a cat. Because if it’s the latter I’m close to my limit and what happens after that?

Rush hour in Middling Slaughter constitutes a couple of angry sparrows fighting over half a dropped sausage roll and the Post Office opening its door with a creak so the post men can hobble out with an actual parcel. All the fanfare it’s causing, Nick reckons they must only get one or two a year and by the time he gets to the Bakery, they’re still arguing about whether a special delivery is the one that needs signing for. The air’s lost its early morning crispness — he was out in the garden this morning just gone seven to have a fag and watch Pig roll on her back in the grass for no particular reason, thought he might get his laptop out and commit to digital paper an anecdote he woke up reliving the middle of, but as soon as he lifted the lid — both actual and metaphorical — his muscles started shivering inside his skin and he just wanted to get as far as possible away from it.

The entire street smells like fresh bread, and when Nick pushes the door of the Bakery open, Harry’s got his hair spilling out of the band that barely keeps it back from his face and he’s racking up neat little granary loaves in the window.

“Morning,” Nick says.

Harry’s smile of reply is bright-eyed and somewhat more real than Nick was expecting, and it takes him a moment to remember that he didn’t just come here to stand and stare at someone who should probably be wearing a hair net.
“You’ve been busy, then. What time you start?”

“Fiveish. Nearly done, though.” He pushes his hair out of his eyes with the back of his wrist and waves Nick towards the little chair and table in the corner. The table has a sandwich menu on it with a note that deliveries can be arranged and they also cater for weddings, christenings, funerals, and other special occasions, and a little flower picked from the woods that’s been neatly arranged in a clean sandwich spread jar. “How long on the crusty rolls, Barbara?”

A voice from the back booms, “Four minutes.”

Harry heaves the plastic tray he was freeing the loaves from out into the back, fusses around with an icing bag and some kind of pastry Nick should probably recognise from the technical on Great British Bake Off. When he’s done, Harry arranges those and a range of custard tarts on stands to complete the display in the window.

“Can’t believe there’s enough passing trade here to even get half of that eaten,” Nick says.

“You’d be surprised.”

Harry wipes his hands on his apron — it’s tied around double at his waist and there’s much less of him than there looked in his vet stuff or his wax jacket. Nick can imagine him on the show, flour on his face and Mel and Sue cooing over him and telling him they appreciate his ability not to get flustered even in amongst actual rather than impending pastry disaster. Harry catches him looking. His face is interesting; Nick’ll give it that.

“I was promised a croissant,” Nick says.

With a roll of his eyes, Harry goes out the back. “Can I take a couple of these?” he says. “They’re singed.”

“How’d that happen?” Beyond the doorway, Barbara shoos at him with a tea towel, and though her spine’s curved like an S, she stands like a general, eyes narrowed at him.


“You cheeky bugger. Have ‘em, go on.”

Harry sticks his tongue between his teeth and grins at her while he puts the spoils of his flattery into a paper bag. The timer on the oven pings. “You want me to get those?”

“Not if you got stuff to do.” She glances at Nick with something that might become disapproval if she leaves it to ferment a day or two. To be fair, Nick is wearing a jumper with a blindfolded rapper on it. “Those recipes of yours are important. New customers, destination venue, way forward.”

Harry’s already taking his apron off and hanging it up behind the door. “You’re a gem, Barbara,” he says, and kisses her on the top of the head before grabbing his jumper. “Ready?”

Nick puts down the menu he’d been fiddling with and stands up.

The newspaper offices, it turns out, are above the Post Office, accessed by a fire escape that’s wrought black iron and barely held to the wall with two rusty bolts. It shakes as they go up it, Harry fishing keys out of his pocket and opening the door at the top while Nick clings to the railing and
imagines the whole thing listing to the side while he’s still on it. Would he actually die? Or if he
braced, might he be able to survive with a broken wrist or two? At the top, he pauses. They’re set
into the hill, so the place looks out over the rooftops, the trees dusted with orange where the sky
peels away from the horizon in a watery blue.

“Do like a good view.”

Harry smiles at him, leans on the desk just inside the door. “You want to eat out there?”

Nick shakes his head and ducks inside. It’s a small place that must’ve been a flat once upon a time —
maybe for some ancient post mistress who dealt in black market love letters and late night
assignations. The room is square, with a huge desk in the middle and a strip of threadbare red carpet
running around it like a jogging track. The walls are almost entirely shelved, folders upon folders and
back issues of the paper neatly labelled, Post-It Notes with phone numbers flapping down, and two
black printers facing each other like they’re trying to decide whether to fight or fuck. Just off the
main room there’s a little kitchen, where Harry’s opening a yellow Formica cupboard to get some
plates and flicking on a kettle with a little green sticker to say it’s been marked safe for use, even
though it looks as if it might be more than half a century old.

He comes back to the desk and kicks out a wheely chair, slides down onto it and offers Nick a plate
with a croissant filled with ham and cheese that’s nothing other than a perfect shade of gold.

Nick takes the plate and the other chair, which has a few loose screws and a slight wobble to it, but
the clutter of old laptop and photo proofs and notebooks on the desk reminds him of plenty of places
he’s worked. Comfortable. It’s a comfortable well-arsed chair and a familiar mess.

“Thanks,” he says. He rips a bit off his croissant and sucks the melted cheese off his fingers. “So
what we doing?”

Harry pulls a notebook towards him. It’s overstuffed with clippings, paperclips marking the
apparently important pages, and he flips to the middle and hands it over. Down the page, there’s a list
of numbers and next to them, little doodles and words crossed out.

“This says Christmas issue — it’s not even Halloween yet.”

“Only get one day off a week – I need to plan ahead. November’s at the printer’s, anyway.” Harry
dangles a pen from his fingers and presses his lips together as he leans in and scans down the page.
“I already started testing the recipes — front runners are easy mince pies and a trifle with a twist.”

“What’s the twist?”

“It’s citrus and chocolate.”

“Controversial.”

“I think it’s quite festive, though? I’m quietly confident people will like it but we can always change
it later if you want.” He runs his finger down the page. “I think we can go with a seasonal word
search rather than a crossword ‘cos it takes up less space but it’s still as entertaining, the problem
page I thought we’d do, like, dealing with a difficult family situation —”

“Someone write in with one already?”

Harry eyes the door, then the shelves, then the door again.

“You make them up, don’t you, the letters?” Nick says.
“Only so I know I know the answer.” Harry clears his throat, reddening slightly under the collar of his jumper. “Be irresponsible wouldn’t it to just… go around offering people advice about stuff I don’t know about. Anyway. Then there’s a feature on gifts on a tight budget that I need some more ideas for, and after that, really all we need is the big cover story. I thought maybe you could start looking for something today.”

“Today?”

“Well, yeah?” Harry’s hands hover over his croissant and he lifts his eyebrows so he looks a bit like a confused squirrel. “I want to get everything finalised as soon as possible.”

“But — news is… supposed to be new? Say I chance upon a huge exclusive, by Christmas it’ll be weeks old, won’t it?”

Setting the croissant down, Harry considers him for a moment before pushing up the sleeves of his giant navy jumper. “You think that’s a problem?”

“Don’t you get annoyed when you get in from work and you put the TV on and they’re still wanging on about something you saw two days ago on Twitter? This is like that but times a million.”

“I don’t watch much telly to be honest. Don’t have time.”

“You do have far more jobs than a normal person.”

“Yeah well,” Harry sighs, and wheels back towards the kitchen as the kettle burbles to a boil, “I’m immensely sexually frustrated, I find it helps to keep busy. Coffee?”

Nick stares at him in the hope he’ll give Nick some indication about whether he just thinks that’s an average thing to say to someone you’re barely acquainted with, but Harry avoids his gaze while he scoops granules into mugs and tops them up with water. He scoots back, a mug in each hand, and gives Nick the one with a misprinted picture of a local church on, keeping the cross-eyed fox for himself.

“Where were we,” Harry says, pulling the notebook towards him and sipping at his drink. “Right, front page — my notes say eye-catching and heart-warming but I’m having a bit of trouble translating that into an actual, like, thing? Pat always used to do the features and her front pages were legendary.”

“The last one was about a cow.”

“Quite a famous cow. Got 45 million hits on YouTube, she has. Probably more now because people are watching all the time aren’t they?”

“How has a cow had —”

“She’s got her own channel. Was doing really well even before we thought she’d been stolen and filmed the search and rescue mission. Then we found her in the next field behind a tractor.” Harry cocks his head. “Did you not like it, the story?”

Nick closes his mouth purposefully and makes a filler noise to avoid the question, because he’s not sure he did more than skim it and double-take at a cud pun. Apparently he missed out. “I was distracted,” he says, with a conciliatory grimace. “Point is, if we wait a bit surely there’ll be a story about dodgy fairy lights at the pub or —”

“There’s nothing wrong with my mum’s fairy lights. She tests them twice before she puts them up.”
“I meant —” Nick scratches at his eyebrow because Harry’s looking at him like he might actually go off on one. Admittedly it’s a bit like a cartoon rabbit facing off against its own shadow, but still. “That was a hypothetical about… another pub where they’re not as careful.” Harry’s frown smooths out a little. “I just meant that nearer Christmas, there might be some sort of tree disaster or a vicar naked at the nativity scandal, that sort of thing.”

“But it was always Pat’s vision that at Christmas the front page should be something happy.”

“If Pat really cared she wouldn’t have fucked off to Barbados though would she.”

Harry’s lips purse. “Pat had not had a holiday in thirty-five years. Even when she broke her leg she came in to print the Christmas issue and delivered every copy herself.”

“Oh my god,” Nick mutters, dropping his head onto his hand.

“We can’t just go about changing things for no reason. People expect a happy story on the front page and we need to start planning it now or it won’t be right. Pat always said happiness doesn’t just walk in, you got to — chase it. That’s why she spent all the money she did on the Lottery.”

“I don’t care what Pat —” Nick sighs at the notebook underneath him. It’s pulsing at the exact same rate as his heart. Harry’s allotted two whole pages to affordable gift ideas and apparently that means one of them is going to have to come up with what’s currently described as ‘something crafty in a jar people can leave on a doorstep when the intended recipient is out (nb maybe tie this to agony, how to avoid unpleasant relatives without having guilt impinge upon your sense of festivity)’.

This is not the way Nick’s life was supposed to be. Right now, he should be lying on a sofa with a hangover and a Starbucks he already regrets buying, planning what he’s going to wear to Jonathan Ross’s Halloween party and fielding calls from friends who want to come as his plus whatever.

“Are you all right? Have you gone faint-y again?”

“No, I’m — fine.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

Nick closes his eyes and pulls himself together behind their lids. He peers up through his fingers. “There’s just a lot to do.”

“If there’s two of us though, we’ll –”

“You don’t think it’s a bit of a waste of time, all this?”

Harry sits back in his chair, considering and offended in equal measure. “No? People rely on it.”

“Yeah I’m sure those reviews of months-old films are real useful in a world where Twitter and illegal downloading exists.”

Harry moves his jaw from side to side. “Maybe in London that’s true, but what about Mrs Whitstable? She can’t go on Twitter to find out what to Netflix — she’s got osteoporosis and arthritis and, like, no computer. Only way she gets to find out what people are talking about is in the paper.”

“Does she read it before or after her dachshund eats it? Do you take that into account during the editing process, break your recipes up to try and avoid him separating the method from the pictures?”

“If you don’t want to help, that’s fine, but it’s not very nice to make fun of things people care about.”
Nick crosses his arms. He’s never been very good with earnest and he’s bloody useless with people being upset with him.

Which Harry definitely is. He’s doing a face like a cow that got kicked in the udder when it was only trying to be friendly and Nick was sort of joking but apparently he stepped over the line he never sees coming that separates funny from hurtful.

He meets Harry’s eye, quickly. “You got hotline, then? Or an email people write to with tips and stories?”

Harry breathes out slowly. “Yeah but I never look at it in case there’s something sad in it.”

“Some journalist you are,” Nick says.

“I never wanted to be a journalist though, did I?” He sighs dramatically. “I just wanted to take pictures of pies and prize vegetables and heroic dogs, sometimes. Why d’you think I wanted help from someone who knows what they’re doing?”

Nick can hardly say the closest he’s ever come to anything hard-nosed was once asking Sheryl Crow for her opinion on his new boots. He rolls his eyes and waves at the laptop. “Fine. Give it here, then.”

Harry slides the laptop over the table, crinkling up some A4 on which he’s written what looks to be a poem about someone with eyes the same colour as the inside of acorns when you pull the acorn bit out. “If there’s anything really bad, just don’t tell me.”

Nick opens the lid and searches for the on button, and the screen blinks into life. The backdrop’s a soothing picture of sheep on a hillside, and whoever had it last has arranged all the desktop icons to sit where the grass is so none of the sheep are covered up by a document or a folder. He waits for it to connect to the internet, sipping his coffee. “How long has it been since you checked this?”

“Couple of months?”

Nick hits the mailbox icon. “Four new messages. Oh hang on, two of them are spam.”

Harry bites his lip. “What are the other two?”

“Invite to cover the ploughing competition and an enquiry about advertising space from someone who wants to sell a low mileage Vauxhall Astra.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a diesel.” Nick hits the icon again but that’s literally it. “Personally I think the ploughing is the strongest contender, if only for the punning potential.” He leans in. “Middling Slaughter fields great plougher ahead of competition, contest set to be a real heart-acre, wheat and see what we’ve got in store.”

“I think those are kind of corn-y.”

“Oh. Oh, very droll.”

Harry sniffs a laugh. He hesitates for just a moment before he reaches to turn the screen towards him. He clicks a folder on the desktop and turns it back, biting his lip. “What d’you think?”

When it opens, it’s a document of pictures and text and placeholder headlines and looks nothing
whatever like the version of the paper Nick picked up in the shop. The recipe page looks like Pinterest Christmas and all the photos of glossy chocolate trifle and tiny, tiny canapés on a snowflake plate against a gingham tablecloth have Harry’s name just neatly tucked into the corner. “I made a couple of changes for the new issue. Thought it could be a bit of a relaunch,” Harry says. “Does it look alright? I’m still learning the programme — I’m not sure I’ve got the right font yet but you have to pay for them and I don’t want to blow the budget unless I’m sure.”

“This looks great, Harry,” Nick says, he suspects doing a poor job of keeping the surprise out of his voice.

“I just want to — I don’t know.” He shakes his head at himself, gaze cast down as he pulls himself in, tucking his arm around his ribs. “I want it to be a really good read for people. I want it to make people feel Christmassy, especially if they haven’t had the best year.”

“Looks well on track to me.”

“I’m just worried if we haven’t got the right front page no one’ll bother with the rest.”

Nick’s throat goes tight, like Harry’s sincerity has formed a lump and now it’s lodged there. He’s not had the best year — in fact, were he to take stock it’s definitely right down there with his fifteenth, a year dogged by a hundred different kinds of insecurity and a gang who chose the back of his coat as spitting target practice. It flickers on inside him like malfunctioning fairy lights that Harry, who has so much going on already, carves out time to do this and gives it much more thought and energy than it deserves. And he does it for people like him. Well, like him if Nick had no access to modern technology, a broken limb and a dachshund with a propensity for trying to digest digested current affairs.

“Something’ll turn up,” Nick says. “Make sure of it.”

“Welcome to the team, then. You can be Head of Features and assistant editor.”

Harry offers Nick his mug to clink against, and Nick sets about sifting through news websites, pretending he’s Tina Daheley.
The thing about fame is, it’s not real, but knowing it’s not doesn’t help you dismantle it. It becomes real in your head. You see it reflected back at you and think it must have substance somewhere buried inside, otherwise people wouldn’t be so obsessed with it. And you stop dreaming of things and wishing for things and start panicking about losing things instead, because everything you have is built upon this thing which you know from the inside is nonsense, but now your life depends on it, on creating more of it, on clinging to what bits of it you still have.

Nick stares at the last few hundred words he’s dragged out of his soul and buffed the shine off, trying to see something in there which doesn’t deserve the unflinching judgement of the backspace key. He focuses on a comma. Is it doing what it’s supposed to? He procrastinated by looking up a guide to usage yesterday but now he can’t remember what it said. He supposes that’s what he’s got an editor for but at the thought of handing this over to someone, his heart canter in both his wrists.

The doorbell bongs to start off its sing-song and Nick lets out a long breath and gets up.

“Hey — hi,” Harry says, before Nick’s even got the door open much past a crack.

Pig bounds over at the sound of his voice and scrabbles at the wood, and Nick grabs for her collar but misses, which affords her free rein to jump up at Harry. He’s dressed in leggings and he shifts his weight from one ridiculous yellow neon trainer to the other, patting Pig’s head as she jerks between his hands in some kind of greeting dance. “You busy?” he says.

“Not especially.”

“’m — doing the jogging thing — you want to come?”

Nick rearranges his hair. He hasn’t encountered a mirror yet today but he can tell by the way it’s lifting from his scalp he probably looks like he recently lost a battle with a slightly dodgy plug socket.

“We’ll take it easy,” Harry says, presumably mistaking Nick’s hair-panic for sport nerves.

Nick can almost feel all the words he hasn’t written burning into the back of his neck like a tattoo, but days of experience has taught him that sitting staring at the screen doesn’t actually help that much and neither does trawling newspapers on his practically non-existent internet while trying not to think about Harry’s apparent lack of sex life.

“Er — ok. Do you want to make yourself at home and I’ll go and put on something less like pyjamas?”

Herding Pig back, Harry shuffles into the lounge and picks up her toy banana in an invite for her to wrestle him.

Nick nips up the stairs, his heart already going like he’s done a few circuits by the time he gets to the top. He turf’s two matching trainers out of one of the wardrobes and finds a pair of gym shorts in a drawer, along with a Miley Cyrus t-shirt he’s keeping for sentimental reasons that’s got a hole under the armpit. He throws them on and grabs a hoodie that he’s been wearing while he reads in bed and the effect is sort of artfully distressed, if he squints.

Once they’re outside Pig explores a fallen tree while Harry rests one foot on it and works through each of the different muscles in his leg, leaning into his knee, then shaking his leg out, bouncing up
and down on the spot. Nick copies a few of his moves, but warming up has always made him feel self-conscious, so he settles for jogging on the spot.

“We going to do this or what?” he says.

Harry lifts an eyebrow, then darts for the trees, hurdling a log that’s cleaved in two and has a cluster of giant mushrooms springing from within. Never one to shrink from a challenge, Pig bolts after him, her ears almost flat to her head, and Nick goes with it, kicking up moist dirt and leaves behind him.

They run past the barn but instead of heading back inside the tree line to the stream and the village, Harry makes for the opposite direction, where a hedge of twisted bracken marks the edge of a farmer’s field. Through the yellow straw-like crop a path weaves and they follow that, Harry setting a pace that makes the bun on the back of his head bop like he’s dancing.

Nick catches him up and stays more or less at his elbow, conscious of the way he’s breathing more heavily, but he’s missed it more than he’ll ever admit, the burn of cold air as it flushes out crevices in his lungs that lie dormant the rest of the time.

“We’re not going to get shot at, are we?” Nick says, words bouncing with exertion.

“Know the farmer.”

Beyond the field there’s another thick ribbon of hedge and a ditch bracketed by fence. They slow down to clamber over the sty and Nick tries to properly focus his eyeballs on something other than the curve of Harry’s arse as he swings his leg over.

On the other side of the fence, the ground’s been turned, great rivulets of earth spewing up stones and upending weeds, a whole acre or more succumbed to a ripple of brown. Pig weaves between them, keen to get her head on Nick’s knee because of those weeks he spent trying to teach her to heel like one of the dancing dogs on *Crufts*.

“If you trip me I swear…” He breaks off into a cough-slash-breathy laugh, catching it in his wrist.

Harry — who’s just ahead — turns around, jogging backwards to look at him. “All right?”

Nick nods. The cold’s given way to heat under his skin, making all of him feel jagged with every push of his lungs, but it’s good. Back in London, he used to do this all the time, run out the morning in the same park as famous yummy mummies and stop for a kale smoothie, convinced if he did it enough times he’d wake up looking like Jude Law. The air here, though, it’s different — it smells earthy and somehow more real — makes it easy to think about running and not his life. He loses himself in listening to his own breathing and the slap-slap-slap of his footprints battening down mud, stamping into the ground the thoughts that’ve calcified around words like *future*, *career*, and *over*.

Several more fields fall beneath them, then Harry points along the hedgerow. There’s a pink flush on each of his cheeks like he’s wearing very eighties blusher and a damp circuit around the line of his hair, and he looks so serious about it Nick wants to laugh. He gives him a shove instead to throw him off balance.

Harry wavers, speeds up with a huff that says, *how dare you*, but he’s grinning underneath it and when Nick catches him, Harry shoves him right back.

Nick narrowly avoids stumbling into the ditch and using the little bit of knowledge he has about how to actually play football, he sticks a foot out, aiming to hook it around Harry’s ankle.

Harry — agile little demon that he apparently is — jumps it, and he manages a flash of smugness
before his trailing foot skids on the mud. With a quavering, “Ohhh,” he lurches like a sprinter going for the tape. It’s useless in terms of regaining his balance and thin mud splashes up all around him as he lands on his hands and hip with a splat.

Laughter bursts out of Nick and he staggers to a halt, hands on his hips to try and get his breath to stay in his chest.

“Don’t, I’m sinking,” Harry says, which only makes Nick guffaw so hard he can’t breathe at all.

Theatrically, Harry wipes his muddy hand on his thigh and reaches out for Nick to help him up.

“If that’s cow shit,” Nick says, but he holds his hand out anyway.

Harry takes it and yanks — he’s far stronger than he looks and Nick’s powerless to stop himself from toppling forward, colliding with Harry and landing on his knees. Harry’s breathing hard and laughing in little snatches and up close, the angles of his face are softer but his eyes are even more like staring into oncoming traffic. Oncoming traffic that’s now got freckles of mud all over its nose.

“You little git,” Nick says.

In reply Harry plants his muddy hand in Nick’s face.

“You little —” Nick squirms away, wiping at the mess with the front of his hoodie. He musters as much indignation as he can and spits out, “— you’re a vet. You’re supposed to be a pillar of the community!”

Harry snorts, ponytail askew and hair spilling free over one side of his face. He scrapes up a fresh handful and goes to do it again, gets as far as Nick’s nose before Nick grabs his wrist. “Mud’s good for your skin,” he says, straining against where Nick’s holding him.

“Suppose it’ll save me getting a facial won’t it?”

Harry raises an eyebrow.

The pull of it goes right to Nick’s stomach and all his awareness narrows to the way his fingers are closed around Harry’s arm.

He clears his throat and lets go, absolutely not thinking about how that same wrist would feel wrapped in his touch and held above Harry’s head against a tree or the hard edge of a doorframe.

“Race you back?” he says.

~*~

Harry comes down from using the shower in one of the spare rooms wearing a pair of Nick’s skinniest jeans and a long grey jumper Nick picked out for him, his head cocked to one side while he rubs at his stringy hair with a towel. There’s a flash of something in it, like Nick’s been here before — even though he hasn’t — and Nick stretches out his shoulders and pokes at the shower-pliant
muscles complaining under his skin. “Going to be in agony tomorrow,” he says.

“I’ll pick you up after work and you can run it off.”

“That’s so not the answer I was looking for. You want to get some lunch?”

Harry’s face lights up but just as quickly falls. “Yeah but I’ve got rounds.”

“No biggy, I’ll —”

“Unless you want to come?” He shakes out his damp hair with his fingers and meets Nick’s eye, hopeful and trying not to show it. “It’s mostly a lot of driving but I am going to the dairy farm with the famous cow. Their yoghurt is incredible.”

Nick glances at his laptop. He lost some of his apprehension on the run and he’s less than no desire to get it back. “If I come can I get a selfie with it? The cow, not the yoghurt, obviously.”

“You want to get a selfie with a cow?”

“You’re the one who built this cow up as something special,” Nick says. “Don’t act like I’m the weirdo for wanting a picture.”

Harry chuck his towel into the washing machine. “Well come on, then,” he says.

Nick drives them to the surgery, where Harry navigates the waiting room’s racks of floored sheep dogs and terriers with a series of cheery hellos and inquiries about how they’re doing to greet the vet with the frizzy hair and another nurse at the desk. He gathers together a bunch of papers that are scattered over it and a box that’s got several bottles of medicinal-looking liquid in and a couple of the plastic bags Pig’s pills came in arranged in some kind of order. The vet adds a tube and bandages to his stash and after a brief conversation Harry grabs a bag and his wax jacket and calls goodbye to someone out the back.

Nick holds the door for him and Harry ducks under his arm. “You sure it’s ok for me to come?” he says.

“Of course.”

“Do I get to do that thing where you wind down the windows and throw your arm out into the air while something really cheesy’s playing on the radio?”

“If you want, just try not to upset the sheep with your singing.”

“Oh you heard me in the shower, then,” Nick says, and Harry snorts.

They bundle into the ancient Range Rover, Pig needing a helping hand or two to clamber up onto the backseat. Harry stuffs one of the sheets of paper onto the dashboard and reverses onto the road, pulling his seatbelt across his chest at the same time.

Long as Nick’s been here, he hasn’t really had a chance to drive about and appreciate the scenery. He rests his head back and watches as the sprout fields give way to other crops he’d struggle to identify, to waving golden stalks and churned up earth, dry stone wall crisscrossing to mark the boundaries and trees dotted about in isolated clumps. The sky’s a benevolent dove-like grey which turns the landscape’s colours up in contrast like some kind of filter on Instagram.
Harry flicks the stereo on and the car fills with Sweet Jane, the guitar trickling down the scale like a waterfall. He drives with one finger hooked over the steering wheel and the other hand resting on the gear stick even though the road twists and turns like a snake on a board game. Nick never really thought about it before but Harry’s steady certainty is good to be around, whispers to him that it might be ok to relax.

Their first stop is a farm house that sits completely alone in acres and acres of nothing but untempered grass. Its walls are aged concrete with rough dappled pink paint over the top, the cracks in it reverse-bleeding grey out and moss trying to hold it together like stitches. Harry rummages for the bandages and the tube and grabs his bag. They knock on the front door and get no reply but barking. Nick follows him around the back, where ducks and rabbits in various stages of rotting swing by their necks from the top of the porch. Harry sweeps them aside while Nick covers his mouth with the cuff of his jumper and gags on the thick scent of fur and feathers and probably guts. Glancing at him, Harry taps on the window with his knuckle. No response so he goes for the back door, picks off a note that was tacked there. He hands it to Nick so he can read for himself the scrawl that looks like it might’ve been done by actual chickens:

*Back in five, come in
Jed*

The door’s unlocked and leads into a cramped kitchen filled with enough pots and pans to keep Mary Berry in coulis and sponges for a decade. The wallpaper — which has a pattern of pears and oranges and possibly used to be white — peels down from the ceiling revealing two different colours of mould. The lino has been worn away in front of all the appliances and replaced by bits of torn cardboard, which might account for the place’s out-the-back-of-a-greengrocer’s aroma.

“Only me,” Harry calls, and above Nick’s head there’s a thump of reply on the floor.

“What the —”

“You want a cup of tea?” Harry calls at the ceiling.

A rickety voice that can barely make it through a word without stopping for a breath replies, “I’ll have little one.”

Harry shakes the kettle that’s crouching menacingly off-kilter on the stove, then fills it from the spluttering tap. He lights the gas ring using matches from a pot by the side and retrieves a very specific cup from the pile in the sink. He gives it a rinse out and sets it on the draining board while he looks for a towel, assessing the various ones hanging off the stove and over the back of the mismatched kitchen chairs for cleanliness.

On the other side of the house there’s more barking and a scrabble of paws at a door and Harry leans his head out of the kitchen and into the hall to shout, “She’s feeling better, then.”

There’s a rifle standing on its end near the doorjamb and Nick swallows, tries to school his face into something approaching normality as Harry comes back and makes half a cup of tea. When he opens the fridge Nick gets a flash of what look like pig’s feet lined up on a shelf like a chorus line, which absolutely does not help.

The back door opens and a man comes in, huffing and puffing over the top of a coat that barely fastens around him. “Ah you’re in,” he says. His nose looks like a strawberry set into a face of ruddy
meringue. He glances at Nick and starts.

Harry introduces him as ‘my friend Nick who’s a writer’ as if that significantly explains Nick’s appearance in his kitchen and then disappears with the tea and a, “I’ll just run this up the stairs, then we’ll take a look at that leg, shall we?”

That leaves Nick alone with Jed in the kitchen and by the time Harry’s creaking his way over the floorboards above, Nick’s sweating and wishing he’d stayed in the car with Pig. “You shoot those yourself?” Nick says, for want of better ideas, with a gesture at the rabbits and ducks outside.

Jed’s scrappy eyebrows dart up with unexpected interest. “You want one?”

“Oh — no thanks, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. Them. I can barely boil a potato.”

Jed almost inverts himself taking his tiny coat off and hangs it up on a hook by the rifle, pulling his tawny sweater down over the hump of his stomach. He makes himself a cup of tea and slurps at it. “Little ones are fiddly but them’s a decent size for plucking. You just got to master the knack.”

“What everyone wants isn’t it, a reputation as a quality plucker.”

Jed stares at him like he can sense Nick’s joking and thinks it’s at his expense and it’s the longest five minutes until Harry comes back again. “Shall I go through?”

Nick follows Harry down the hall to a shut door behind which there’s a furious sniffing and scratching. He reaches for the handle with scant regard to the hell beast he’s about to unleash and Nick flattens to the wall, bracing against the chintzy paper. What comes out however is a perfectly average-looking if slightly old and ragged lab with a grubby bandage wrapped from its paw to elbow.

Greeting it with a coo of familiarity, Harry kneels down in the middle of the room and drops his bag to one side.

“Mum’s been worried sick, she has.” Jed hovers in the corner next to a grandfather clock erroneously displaying the time as four o’clock, tugging on his sleeve. “I been taking the pup out but he’s not the brightest spark, not like Tracy.”

Nick half-listens as Jed regales the three of them with a story about shooting a partridge and the puppy coming back with a clump of bulrushes instead, steadfastly avoiding looking when Harry undoes the bandage, applies whatever is in the tube, and replaces it with a fresh one. “It’s healing nicely,” he says, and ruffles Tracy’s ears before he gets up. “I’ll pop back next week but shouldn’t need redressing after that.”

Harry ditches the old bandages in the bin and washes his hands before giving pills and instructions to Jed, and bidding a farewell to the voice that lives upstairs. Nick follows him out, ducking the ducks and waving half-heartedly at the window.

The next stop’s in a more normal sort of place to check on a cat that’s newly diagnosed with diabetes — although Nick gets the impression the owner was the one in need more than the snoozing pile of paws and irritation that is the cat — and then Harry drops some medication off for a breeder of miniature pinschers before pulling back onto the main road to Whomping.

They take a spin through the village — Nick notes a hairdresser called Curl Up and Dye and a shop that sells nothing but homemade candles called In the Wind — before descending a hill to where the countryside plateaus and the road follows the coursing of a fast-running stream. They wind through the trees and Nick gets his phone out to take a picture of how pretty the light filtering through the
canopy is, but before he can, Harry takes a turn so sharp Nick careens across the seat and has to brace against the dashboard.

“Sorry,” Harry says, but he doesn’t really look it.

Too late Nick sees the sign that indicates a private road leading to Rook Farm, but it’s another quarter of a mile down the track to anything that looks vaguely habited. The farm starts with a vast concrete drive, a couple of barns made of corrugated steel shielding from the approach what’s behind — a series of smaller sheds guarded by an ageing forklift and tractor that look like they should be on eBay as parts — but off to the side is a squat little red brick house that’s got fruit and veg outside and a sign that says Farm Shop in curly script. Beyond that lie fields with troughs like upturned steel pipes clustered around by cows with yellow tags in their ears.

Harry pulls into a space in the customer car park and gets out. Apparently oblivious to the thick, sweet scent of manure enveloping them he goes round to the boot of the car, where he sits on the tailgate and pulls on his wellies. “Bring Pig if you want,” he says, “but she needs to stay on her lead.”

Pig has nothing but enthusiasm for the idea, although when Nick sees the state of the concrete, he grimaces at the thought of hosing her down to get rid of the mix of mud and straw and cow poo she’ll no doubt get splattered all over her. She strains to get away into the fields and Nick tugs her back. “Be good, you, we’re not about to start an accidental cow riot.”

Harry meets his eye. “The word would be stampede,” he says.

“How’m I supposed to know that? I haven’t been to vet school.”

“You’re a writer, though. Aren’t you supposed to know what words mean?”

Nick ruffles his hair and looks at the front of the shop. “Where’s this yoghurt, then?”

“Work first, then yoghurt.” Harry shoulders his bag and strides off towards the house making little splashes in the slurry.

While Nick picks his way more carefully on boots that he used to like a lot, he nips around the back — Nick’s getting the impression there’s a great deal of that involved in his job, that at its heart what he does is get really familiar with the various ways in and out of someone’s house — and knocks on the doorframe. Almost immediately a face appears, a much younger and less ragged one than Nick was expecting, topped with bottle-blond hair and a flat cap that Nick thinks might actually have been part of YSL’s autumn/winter collection. They grin at each other and hug before the door’s even open, and noticing Nick the guy hobbles out, one elbow tucked into the end of a grey plastic hospital-issue crutch. His foot is encased in a giant plastic boot and it gives him a gait like a Stormtrooper.

Harry introduces them with a quick Nick-Niall-Niall-Nick and Niall shakes Nick’s hand vigorously even though he has to adjust his crutch to stay on his foot.

“How’re you, you well?” Niall says, like he’s forgotten they don’t know each other.

“Better than you by the looks of it.”

“Well,” Niall says, “was me own fault. Should know by now desert boots, cheap plonk and cow shit don’t mix.”

“Technically think it was piss you slipped in,” Harry says.
Niall shrugs. “Be good as new soon. Top night, that.”

He ushers them into a small room that’s part office and part stock cupboard. A desk takes up most of one corner, the walls above it littered with rosettes and framed pictures of cows that appear to have been picked for their ability to be photogenic. In one of them Niall’s got his arm around the thing’s neck and there’s another of him and Harry sitting on a fence, both of them chewing on long pieces of hay like some kind of cliché while the sun sets behind them. Above that there’s miniature pots, wooden spoons, and stacks of paper cups all branded with the farm name and a drawing of a cartoon cow with flowers in what would be her hair if she had any.

Niall plonks down on the chair and stows his crutch while Harry takes the footstool and digs in his bag for some paperwork. “So I got your locomotion results,” Harry says.

The ensuing conversation is heavy on the hooves and Nick tunes it out in favour of flicking through a magazine selling farm equipment, boggling at the price of even the smallest combine harvester and wondering vaguely what he’d look like on the back of a tractor. When it becomes clear the hoof talk isn’t going to be over anytime soon, he asks Niall if it’s ok to take Pig for a bit of a wander. Niall gives him detailed instructions for a nice little walk that’ll take him down by the stream, which Nick forgets almost as soon as he’s out of the door.

He keeps Pig on a tight lead and walks the line of the fence with her trotting at his ankles. He’s always felt there’s something quite soothing about cows and time slips by easy enough until Harry and Niall are done. Niall hobbles into the shop while Harry strides towards one of the barns. He disappears inside looking quite serious and in a flash Nick remembers a mid-afternoon Sunday documentary he saw on culling that made him go vegetarian for a fortnight.

Oh god what if Harry’s here to shoot a cow in the face?

He tells himself not to be ridiculous, Harry wouldn’t have invited him along to a cow murder — although it was supposed to be for the good of the herd, wasn’t it, the culling, which he supposes would technically make it cow-slaughter. Maybe this would be normal to Harry – hey come watch me kill a cow and then we’ll have yoghurt. Mentally he goes back over the size and shape of Harry’s bag trying to work out if there was room for a gun in there but honestly he’s no idea what kind of weapon it takes to send a cow to the great green pasture in the sky.

He tugs Pig to him and tries not to think about it, but still he full-body winces at what he thinks is the echoing ricochet of a gunshot off the hill, panicking about how successfully he’ll be able to pretend to be ok with it. When he looks towards where the noise originated, though, there’s just Harry righting a metal bucket he apparently kicked while exiting the barn. He spots Nick and waves, jogging over to where Nick froze, near to where some of the herd congregated for a communal sit down.

“Is it going to rain?” Nick says, compulsively checking Harry’s hands for a firearm. Would he do it outside in front of the others like a warning? “S’what they say isn’t it, cows sit down when it’s going to rain.”

“There’s never been any scientific evidence cows can forecast weather better than, like, sheep. They’re just chewing, probably.”

“That’s taken all the magic out of it.” Nick kicks at the grass but he can’t help himself. “You going to shoot one? A cow?”

“Why would I shoot a cow?”
“Well ‘cos it’s part of the job init?”

“No,” Harry says, all reedy and whiney like Nick is the most abysmally stupid creature he’s ever encountered. “I came out to check on their feet.”

“Like giving them a pedicure?”

“No — exactly —” Harry says, then frowns. “— but — well — yeah close enough, I guess. It’s important to the health and productivity of the herd — why d’you think I’d randomly start shooting them?”

“I didn’t say at random. Just, like, if they’re sick.”

“Generally try and work towards not having to euthanise them? That’s sort of the point of my entire existence?” He shoves a hand away from himself. “Anyway, it’s specialist the —” Reluctantly he gestures at his head. “Is this why you went funny in the waiting room? You thought I was going to shoot Pig for being sick?”

“Well I don’t know, do I. I saw something on telly —”

“I think maybe someone needs to supervise what you’re watching more closely,” Harry says, with a little amused glance at him.

Nick shields his eyes from the weak sunlight breaking through the clouds to look at the cows clustered at the fencepost. “Which one’s the famous one, then?”

“One with the slight ring around her eye.”

“A what? I can’t…?”

Harry points into the field. “That one there.”

When Nick still doesn’t get it he moves in closer, so close his breath hits Nick’s neck and Nick forgets completely to follow where he’s indicating. He skims blankly at the herd. “Which...?”

Harry digs his fingers into Nick’s arm to line them up better and lifts Nick’s wrist. He works his grip down to Nick’s hand and points for him with his own finger. “That one.”

Nick breathes very deliberately and focuses on his hand and Harry’s and the cow he’s supposed to be looking at. “Looks exactly like all the others.”

“She’s got personality, though,” Harry says. He lets go and shouts, “Mabel? You want a treat, Mabel?” He shakes his pocket and beyond the water trough, one of the cows that Nick wasn’t even considering lumbers to her feet. She ambles over and Harry holds his palm out to feed her a couple of pellets of something.

“Can I?” Nick says, hovering not quite sure if he should touch her.

“Sure. She’s friendly.”

Harry rubs his knuckles up and down her nose to illustrate and gingerly Nick extends his hand to rest it on her neck. He’s half expecting her to snap and have his arm off like a crocodile but she just stands there chewing, solid and warm and muscular beneath his fingers. “Never touched a cow before. Not one that was still a cow, anyway, and not steak.”

“Don’t say steak in front of Mabel, it’s insensitive,” Harry says, and Nick can’t tell at all if he’s
“She do any tricks or anything then?”

“Tricks?”

“I don’t know, like sit or beg or play dead or something?”

“She’s a cow, Nick.”

“A famous one though, you said.”

“You don’t have to be able to do anything special to be famous.”

Nick can’t argue with that.

Harry wipes his cow-slobbered hand on Nick’s jeans and squints up at him. “Mabel’s mum died just after she was born, so me and Niall, we hand-reared her. It’s a lot of late nights and early mornings and to stay awake we’d make videos and post them — it sort of went from there. Her fans comment just to say hello and ask how she is nearly every day.”

“Lot of pressure for her.”

“She’s dealing.” Harry pats her neck and ducks down to nuzzle the side of her face. Behind her a couple of the other cows are stirring, eying Harry like it might be worth their while coming over after all. “You want to take your selfie?”

Nick gets his phone out and backs towards the fence, stumbling over a divot of grass as he manoeuvres to get them both in shot. He lines them up, ignoring the way Harry’s smirking as he adjusts for the best light. Just as he takes the picture, Mabel extends her tongue and licks him right up the side of his neck.

Harry cackles. “See?” he says. “Personality.”

Wiping himself with his jumper, Nick looks down at his camera. He’s slightly blurred, surprised and grimace-smiling.

“You want to do another one?” Harry says.

“No, it’s perfect. Thank you Mabel, it was nice to meet you.”

Harry gives her a little bow of farewell and they walk back across the grass to the shop bumping elbows.

Niall greets them with two pots of yoghurt, one topped with strawberries and the other with flakes of toasted almond and smashed blueberries. He hands the strawberry one to Harry and offers the other to Nick. “This week’s special,” he says.

Owing to his crutch he had to carry them both in one hand and there’s a thumb-shape in it but Nick takes it anyway and shovels a spoonful into his mouth. “This is incredible.”

“Told you,” Harry says, grinning around his spoon.

They make another few stops to drop off prescriptions to the housebound and reassurance-starved.
Nick gets to play with kittens and watch Harry give a jab to a goat, and somewhere between it trying to eat the rips in his jeans and the last stop at an alpaca farm, all the stories he’s been trying to stitch together so they look like an adequate life slip towards the back of his head and through the flimsy bone of his skull. While Harry treats one with a skin condition Nick learns about alpacas — primarily what they are but also that you never approach one from behind — and by the time they’re finished the sun’s setting.

Harry yawns into his cuff. “That’s us done, then.”

“If you’re knackered, I’ll drive.”

“M’fine.” He stifles a follow-up yawn and Nick pokes at his jacket pocket.

“Just gimme the keys. I let you drive mine.”

“Do you know the way?”

“No, but I don’t mind getting lost for a bit if you don’t.”

Harry drops the keys into his hand, gets into the passenger seat and switches on the stereo, skipping through the mix CDs he’s got on rotation until he gets to a track he likes. He settles back on the headrest and looks out of the window, smiling like Mick Jagger’s singing only to him about dreams and being someone’s pet Pekinese.

It takes Nick a couple of miles to really get to grips with the Rover’s spongey handling but being so much higher than in his own car offers him a better view of the fields. He used to think his friends were being weird when they’d talk about getting away from it all in the country, but apparently there’s something to the idea that physical distance from the source of your problems causes them to diminish; his shoulders feel like shoulders for the first time in as long as he can remember.

A flock of birds swarms into a cloud right ahead of them and dives to make shapes across the sky. They form a near perfect question mark and then a taco and he’s about to ask Harry does he think they can do words when Harry lets out a short, loud snore.

He’s fast asleep with his head against the window and his hand caught under his seatbelt.

Nick takes what probably counts as the longest long way home in history, tuning into Harry’s music and letting his thoughts disperse like birds who’ve done a display and then settled down to roost.

By the time he gets to the familiar sign for the ploughing contest — albeit from the other direction — it’s dark. He should probably go to the surgery and get his own car back but Harry’s muttering to himself in his sleep so Nick elects instead to just drive him home.

“Wake up snoozy pants, we’re here,” he says, but Harry doesn’t stir when he pulls into the pub car park, or when he turns off the engine.

In the space where the music was, Harry’s breathing seems really loud and Nick hovers like he did with Mabel about touching him because it feels illicit in a way that it’s actually not.

“Hey,” he says quietly and jiggles Harry’s shoulder.

It takes a moment and another jiggle with more purpose behind it but Harry jerks awake, blinking furiously like he’s trying to make what he’s looking at stick. What he’s looking at is Nick and it’s disconcerting and nice in equal measure.
“Sorry,” Nick says.

Harry unfastens his seatbelt and paws at his head, before he fixes Nick with a more curious gaze that roves from his eyes to his chin and then scans ear to ear. “What’s —” He pauses and because Nick was leaning over they’re much closer than maybe he intended. “Your face looks different.”

“What?” Nick says, but now Harry’s drawn his attention to it, it feels different. Like all undone on the inside.

“You’re kind of, like, legitimately smiling.”

It’d be a silly thing to get defensive about or deny, so Nick says, “Maybe I had a nice day.”

Harry lifts his lashes very slowly, gaze following until it hits Nick’s. “You want a pint?” he says.
Routine

Leaving Radio 1 was….

Well, it was decided. We all sat around and agreed it was time for me to move on.

I thought I’d take a month or two off to chill out and really think about what I wanted to do next, talk to some people, see what might be on offer. Only when I stopped I realised nearly everyone I knew had leapt ahead of me — they had husbands and babies and four storey houses to decorate, and I was still at the stage where if I made actual food for dinner I felt like someone should give me a medal.

My brain can’t handle chilling out, as it happens, so it filled the hours that used to be devoted to working with panicking about not working, running in increasingly frantic circles around the idea that the only thing I ever really wanted was in the past. All the time I was doing the show, I never realised the future froze around me. Was like I’d been stuck in a photograph I’d imagined when I was 15. And then someone held a lighter underneath and it shrivelled into ash.

When you’re at school they ask you, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

There’s no, “And after that? When that’s over, then what?”

~*~

The next few weeks fold up and rearrange themselves around a routine. Harry knocks when he’s off on one of his jogs to see if Nick wants to join him, nips in sometimes on his way back from work to play with Pig and have a coffee, and Nick goes over on Fridays to pick Harry up from the Bakery, where he lies to Barbara about having singed things or messed up the icing and she pretends to believe him and shoves them out of the door with a bag of carbohydrates. They come up to the room above the Post Office and Nick tells him about all the people he’s spoken to in pursuit of the perfect Christmas front page — the woman in the shop who thinks there’s a cat at the vicarage due to give birth on Christmas Day, the builder from the bus stop who said he heard a rumour the lights might be switched on by someone from Emmerdale — and Harry frets about his photos and hmmm’s through all Nick’s ideas while he works out the crossword for the edition after Christmas in his mission to get ahead.

The temperature dwindles and December looms closer, and over the rattle of the ancient heater and the first mince pies of the season — which are definitely the best Nick’s ever had for breakfast — they brainstorm gifts you can make at home, like cake mix in a jar that just needs water and an egg adding to it and stuff that looks attractive pickled. Nick calls his mum for help, and once she’s done with the, “Where the bloody hell have you been?! No reception? What? Didn’t you have a home phone?!” part, she gives him a recipe for chutney that’s apparently fool proof enough for even him to handle.

“Does this look like the right amount of vinegar to you?” Nick shoves the notebook where he wrote
everything down across to Harry. “Seems excessive unless we’re disposing of a body.”

“Vinegar doesn’t — I think you’ve fundamentally misunderstood the principles of preserving,” Harry says, brushing icing sugar off his jumper. “If we wanted a seasonal way to get rid of a corpse we’d roast and glaze bits like a ham then mince the rest and put it in haggis. No one ever knows what that’s supposed to taste like and I bet you’d get a fair few out of a human intestine.”

Nick grimaces. “Thank you Mrs Lovett. Say the only thing I want to kill is cheese crackers though?”

“Maybe we should trial it,” Harry says. “I got surgery this afternoon but — you busy tonight?”

“Look at the mess —” Nick rolls his eyes at the pastry crumbs he’s spilled down himself, but Harry’s peering at him all nervous round the edges. “No, why?”

“I’ll pick you up? We’ll go to the supermarket. The big one,” Harry says. “It’s got a Costa in it and everything.”

Nick widens his eyes in some mockery of actual excitement. “Whatever will I wear,” he says, even though Harry and a big supermarket with a coffee place in it actually sounds all right.

~*~

Harry’s old Range Rover shudders to a halt outside, and Nick closes the book he’s been pretending to read for more than an hour in order to look intellectual from outside the window. He strides over to the door, opening it before Harry can ring the doorbell. “Finally,” he says.

“Sorry.” Harry forces a smile but he’s sagging inside his jumper — a brown effort with squares on that comes almost down to his knees. “I texted, didn’t you get it?”

In truth Nick’s got so used to being unreachable he didn’t check. “Everything ok?”

Harry shrugs one shoulder, and the inky evening sky behind him is the same colour as the little hollows under his eyes that didn’t seem half as noticeable this morning. “Mrs Whitstable had to go to hospital,” he says, and before Nick can ask how she’s doing, he motors on. “You ready?”

“Yeah. Yeah sure.”

Feeling off centre all of a sudden, Nick says goodbye to Pig and locks up, climbs onto the passenger seat. He sort of hates this moment, the one where things get real with someone, the one where he can’t pretend anymore their life is all roses and puppies and that if he’s in it, his will be too.

Harry points to the backseat. “Basil’s staying w’mee while they assess her.”

“Oh.” Nick pivots to give him a little scratch on top of his head. “Is she going to be all right?”

“Dunno. S’why they’re assessing her.”

Nick tries a smile, but that and the words of bland encouragement and platitude won’t come. “I got
the list and everything,” he says, defaulting to awkward bluster. “So we’ll just have a quick whizz round, get everything we need and do one.” His enthusiasm sounds fake even to his own ears, and Nick taps his foot against the carpet in the foot well all the way to the signpost that’ll take them out of the village and to the halcyon ground of the big supermarket. “Will they have a hairnet for a dachshund at Asda, do you reckon?”

“It’s only a trial run.” Harry looks in the mirror at Basil. “You can shed in it as much as you want, mate.”

“Hey, I was going to actually send this to people as a present.”

“Put a bow in it and call it artisan and no one’ll care,” Harry says.

They wind through the maze of stone-walled countryside, past where the telephone lines run out around the bottom of the hill. It’s a darker kind of dark than Nick’s used to, and he leans his head against the window to look at the stars. He knows there aren’t more of them here, but now they’re away from the houses, it does seem like they’re more important, more visible, somehow. One time with Annie they went to a place on the coast of Spain neither of them could pronounce looking for a yoga retreat that they told each other they really needed after a big weekend, and high on kale and being inverted for hours on end, they took a boat out, lay back, and stared up.

“You ever wonder, Grim, what it’s all really about?”

“Best not to, init,” he said, “or you realise it’s probably about nothing.”

They stayed for ages just rocking. Would’ve felt more profound if a party boat hadn’t honked and powered into their space with two rival groups of revellers throwing up off the side while Avicii blared from tinny speakers.

“You mind if I put the radio on?”

“No but you’ll be lucky to find anything but static. I put some new CDs in the glovebox.”

Nick roots around and comes back with Fleetwood Mac and Simon & Garfunkel. “This is stretching the definition of new quite a bit.” He goes with the former and they start up the hill with a crunch of gears. He tries not to panic but there’s a crumbling incline on one side and on the other, nothing but a bit of barbed wire between them and a sheer drop.

Headlights flash ahead and a woman in a Fiesta bombs past them so fast the car shakes.

“Jesus.” Nick clutches his chest and twists in his seat to watch her retreat down the hill, her brake lights barely troubled by the turn before she disappears out of sight.

Harry’s quietly laughing at him; it turns into him singing along with Stevie Nicks, low and rumbling, all the words in perfect order and him matching the cadence of her voice. He’s got one of those faces that gives away what he’s feeling so Nick can see the way worry ebbs out of him after a while, or he shelves it until later at the behest of _Landslide_, at least.

The out of town Asda is lit up like Blackpool Illuminations, a handful of cars spread out over the spaces.

“Busy,” Harry says as he gets out and picks Basil up off the back seat.
They wrangle a trolley out of a caterpillar of them by the front door and Nick gets his list out so they can weave between the aisles with maximum efficiency. Once he’s inside, though, he gets distracted by a Santa that looks like it’s trying to get into twerking and a reindeer for your doorstep that belts out *Jingle Bells* when someone moves in front of it. He fingers the gaudy baubles and the tinsel that’s on special offer, running it through his hand so it gives off little sparkles he could catch and keep in the palm of his hand.

“We should get this,” Harry says, holding up a can of fake snow. “Do some snowflakes on the windows.”

Nick nods and Harry drops it into the trolley and goes to look at charity Christmas cards, turning them over slowly to read where the proceeds go.

“You not making your own?” Nick says. “Can just see you with a face full of glitter and those little fake snowballs in your hair.”

Harry drops a couple of packets in — one with a Jack Russell in a Santa hat for Battersea Dog’s and Cat’s Home and another with a photo of a pine cone in the snow for Shelter — and on impulse Nick grabs a pack too because there’s a camel on it.

Harry leans on the handle of the trolley, rocking back on his heels while Basil stares up at him balefully for another cuddle. “You getting the tinsel?”

Nick snakes it over his hand again and puts it back in the bin. “Only look lost in that huge house. Be going home, anyway.”

With a small smile, Harry pushes off towards the fruit and vegetables. “What’s first?” He lifts his feet up off the ground and leans over the trolley in a free-wheel, Basil scampering beside him to keep up.

Nick fumbles his list out of his pocket. “Apples,” he says. “We need a load of apples.”

“Cooking?” Harry glides to a stop in front of a selection of the lumpiest bumpiest apples Nick has seen in his whole life. He picks one out and inspects it.

“It doesn’t say — is there really any difference?”

“Yes?” Harry meets his eye with the kind of withering Nick only usually sees on his mother. “That’s kind of why they’re called different things?”

“I don’t buy it. These ones just don’t look so pretty as the others and they’re trying to make them feel less bad about it by pretending they have some special purpose.”

“Sort of like, ‘Oh he’s a cooker, our Graham?’” Harry weighs a dozen or so of them while Nick fights to get a flimsy plastic bag free of the roll it’s attached to, static making it cling to the cuff of his jumper so to get it off he has to do a bad impression of Taylor Swift with a gymnastic ribbon. Harry takes it from him, making no attempt to hide the smile at Nick’s ineptitude and ties the apples up while Nick wrestles with another for the tomatoes.

He holds the bag open while Harry selects a handful of the biggest, beefiest ones, and they move meticulous through onions and cranberries, Nick ticking off each item. Harry adds a few things that aren’t on the list — some chestnuts because he thinks he can scatter them in the photos and he really likes to roast them, sometimes does them with sprouts which is apparently a taste-sensation not to be missed, some clementines with the leaves still on just because he likes them.

“Right then,” Nick says, and looks up at the signs hanging from the ceiling. “Where will we find the
“vinegar?”

They get six crates of cider too because it’s on special — “Mum and me can mull it, it’s silly to use the really nice stuff,” Harry says, by way of explanation, and while they wait at the checkout Nick ducks down to play with Basil, lifting his paws to see if he’ll dance.

“Huh, same name as you.”

Nick’s spine tightens. He flattens into a nonchalant kind of expression, like he didn’t hear, glances at the magazine as he stands. It’s not as bad as it could be — there’s no picture of his face in a bubble, just one of a guy who looks fourteen and a yellow: Nick Grimshaw’s replacement feeling the pressure? Going on his face it looks like it, but this time last year they chose a picture of Nick actually frowning about a parking ticket to illustrate his inner torment.

“You want one of these?” Nick says, and gets a fruity water out of the mini fridge by the stack of baskets.

“I thought maybe we could get a coffee?”

Normally it’d be the kind of hopeful face Nick would find irresistible, but Nick’s neck is burning like everyone in here is staring at him, like the words of every article written in the last six months are hovering like starlings and about to swarm into a giant blinking arrow. “Bit late, init, for caffeine? Can we swap for a pint?”

“Sure.”

They load up the car with their shopping. Nick gets into the passenger seat and arranges Basil on his knees, imagining all the questions Harry might spring on him when it’s just the three of them, the open road, and a bag full of ugly cooking apples. He probably should’ve said something sooner, but firstly there’s no way to say ‘so hey I’m sort of famous’ without sounding like a dickhead and secondly he has no idea what’s been happening with that side of his life since he left London. If anything has been at all. The emails about it have been piling up quite nicely without his interference, thanks very much, and he’s quite enjoying having someone to hang out with who not only couldn’t give a shit about any of it but doesn’t know it exists. His friends mean well but he hasn’t missed it, the eddy of questions about if anything has turned up and the quiet furrowed eyebrows that say to get a move on before everyone forgets who he is. Nick slips Basil one of the organic bone-shaped treats he bought for Pig. Maybe he’s on borrowed time with Harry but a panic-free zone on loan is better than nothing.

“You’ll spoil him,” Harry says.

“If I wanted to do that I’d have bought him a copy of Heat to chew over.”

“Best thing for it, but —” Harry pulls onto the road. “— going by the teeth marks in my mum’s copy I think he prefers the consistency of Women’s Health.”

“Suppose at least there might be vitamins in that. Here — maybe we can do that for the new year edition — print it on paper infused with detox supplements.”

“You get on that with the printer. I’ll enjoy his laughter from a safe distance.”

“It’s a thing!” Nick says. “I had these stickers once — you put ’em on your feet and they suck all the impurities out of your body.”

Harry glances over, impressively unconvinced.
“I’m actually ninety,” Nick says. “Before I used them I was just one big wrinkle. If anything they’re too powerful.”

“Fine, then. Detox edition, edible for all. What’re we using for ink?”

“Kale juice, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m glad we could agree on this. We’re going to revolutionise a dying industry.”

Harry smirks and sings along with Fleetwood Mac the rest of the way back to the pub, changing the odd lyric to *sky’s the limit now, we can hit it on the kale and when the kale washes you clean you’ll know* and checking to see if Nick’s noticed in an appropriately appreciative fashion.

They pile out into the carpark and stagger to the back door to commandeer the kitchen, Harry dumping the bags on the steel counter and rolling up his sleeves.

Nick rubs at his shoulder where it’s aching from dragging his own weight in cider inside. He should’ve done it in a couple more trips, probably, but some part of his brain decided this was the moment for a display of traditional masculinity. Maybe it thought he could pre-emptively make up for Harry finding out he’s a wanky London media tosspot by carrying more than his fair share. He massages the back of his neck and Basil nudges Harry’s calf with his nose.

“Take him upstairs? I’ll start on the apples.”

Nick scoops Basil up. “Through here, is it?”

It’s not the biggest place in the world. The hallway’s a narrow corridor of magnolia wood chip. It’s stacked with boxes of mixers in little cans, and up the stairs, the ceiling gets really low so Nick has to duck and nearly dislodges a picture of a surly-looking fox and its cubs. At the top, the flat never really opens out, it’s just a series of rooms off a compact lounge, the chatter from the pub underneath making a carpet and all the white gloss doors yellowed with age. Every bit of wall space is covered, like the pictures are part of the flock pattern — there’s arty black and white photos of trees and the seaside and an old broken up pier sitting next to family holidays with a tinge of 90s and babies in heart-shaped frames.

Basil knocks his head into Nick’s chest and stares pointedly at the kitchen, so Nick gets him a dish of water and some food from the rolled-up bag under the counter. There’s pictures taped to the front of the fridge — Harry and Anne, Harry outside All Creatures Great and Small with much shorter hair and both his thumbs raised, them both with a girl outside student halls, Anne and the girl wearing feather boas like they’re on a hen night. Nick smiles at them, touches the corner of the one of Harry, imagining the life he might’ve had in-between each snapshot.

The next door off the lounge is obviously Harry’s room, cameras and lenses on the desk visible where he’s left it ajar. There are a lot of books crammed in there, animals and photography and cooking and Stephen Fry’s autobiography, and there’s a string of fairy lights above the bed that don’t look like they’re there just for Christmas. Harry’s woolly hats nestle on the top of the wardrobe door and a jumper or two hangs off the handle. He pictures Harry sitting on the bed against the wall, his knees up and a textbook about cow feet balanced on them, a cup of tea, maybe, curled in his hand. It’s a room to be happy and cosy in and Nick’s glad.

He checks on Basil but he’s found the sofa and is making himself a nest with a cardigan and a cushion, all the paper already stowed out of reach, so he closes the door and creeps down the stairs.
like he wasn’t supposed to be in there at all.

In the kitchen, Harry’s already got all the apples peeled and chopped and he’s started on the tomatoes, splitting the skin with a knife before he drops them into boiling water. He’s apparently decided that the optimum chutney making music is *Voodoo Lounge*, his phone propped up in a saucepan where it hangs from the shelf that runs the entire length of the wall.

“You want to do the onions?”

“Not really,” Nick says.

Harry stares at him until he reluctantly pushes up the sleeves of his jumper. “How many?”

“Four hundred grams.”

Nick drags the scale towards him. It’s one of those flat black digital ones he’s seen on *Bake Off* and he places an onion on it and waits. Nothing happens. He runs his fingers down both sides for an ‘on’ switch but there’s nothing there.

Glancing at Harry, who’s humming along and plodding through the tomatoes like an actual chef, Nick wonders if he can just guess, but if he ever had it in him to guesstimate the weight of an onion Harry’s too distracting.

Harry catches him looking, corner of his mouth curling up. “You all right?”

“How do I turn it on?”

Harry puts his knife down and bumps Nick with his hip. “You just press the thing.” He touches a single finger to the top of the scale and green garbles flash up before settling to an actual number. “Pile ‘em on.”

Nick makes as neat a stack as he can with things that roll, holds his hands above them to catch if they start making a break for it.

“Perfect.” Harry goes back to his tomatoes, fishing one out of the pan with a slatted spoon. “It says chop them very finely but they’ll be boiling for ages so I don’t think it really matters.” Harry looks up from the notebook with a quick frown. “Not that I’m criticising your mum’s recipe.”

Reaching for a knife from the magnetic strip above the oven, Nick slices the tops and root-y bottom bits off each onion in turn, digs his nails in and tries to claw the brown off. He manages to get one partially skinned but it squirts and gets him right in the eye with its juice. Winking out, he starts in on the second, tearing the skin off in chunks. He winces and coughs into the shoulder of his jumper, trying to get his face as far away from the onion as possible while still holding it. “Oh bloody hell. How strong are they?”

“Run ‘em under the tap.”

Nick screws his face up against tears and inches down the counter, patting at the steel to guide him.

“What are you —”

“Just tell me when I’m close.” Nick’s knee catches on something cold, metal and pointy. He stumbles, trying to force his eyes open, and somewhere behind all the wetness there’s the floating blob of Harry’s chest.
Harry takes the onion from him with a sigh and two seconds later he’s running the tap.

“I could’ve done it,” Nick says, even though he’s mopping his eyes with the front of his jumper with one hand and massaging his shin with the other.

When Nick emerges, Harry’s scraping the skins into the bin and the onions are all sitting in a little puddle on the chopping board. “Just watch you don’t hurt yourself,” he says, having apparently gauged Nick’s level of kitchen ability.

The track on Harry’s phone changes and he bobs on the spot, singing along to some advice about stopping living in the past and looking through tinted glasses.

Nick works his way through the onions, narrowly missing slicing his thumb open twice before he’s even halfway through. While he makes a meal of that Harry adds the spices, vinegar, and various shrivelled fruit to the pan on the stove. Nick drops the last handful of onion bits in, missing the pot with about half of them, then retreating to the sink to wash his hands.

Harry stirs the brew, his tongue caught between his lips. His tomato and apple bits are pretty uniform compared to Nick’s, which look a bit like an inept henchman has been at them using the wrong hand.

“How long’s it need?” Nick says, opening the timer on his phone.

“Two hours.”

“Two?!”

“It’s — yeah.”

Nick supposes he should show willing, so he goes over and takes the spoon. He scrapes around the pan with a horrible screech of metal on metal, pushing some of the floating stuff down to the bottom and dredging up some chunked onion from the bottom. He lifts it to his lips and breathes in and — god, that was definitely in a mistake. Coughing, he recoils, and Harry’s just staring at him so Nick, channelling John Torode, shoves the spoon in his mouth.

“Wait, don’t —”

The eruption in Nick’s throat and his nasal cavity sets off taps in his eyes and his mouth simultaneously.

“Why would you —” Harry says, reaching for the spoon far too late.

Nick gurgles in displeasure at the burning acridity on his tongue and hops on the spot, looking for somewhere to spit it. “Mmmmmnnnnnrgrghhhhhhhhh?!” He flaps his arms and Harry must understand it as the universal gesture for where’s the bin?! because he grabs it from under the counter and even opens the lid.

Nick spits the mess into it and pulls his sleeve down to wipe at his mouth.

“You doughnut.” Harry shoves him, laughing. He fishes on one of the shelves for a plastic tub and brings it down. “You want a muffin to take the taste away?”

Nick hesitates, thinking mostly of his jeans.

“They’re low carb no dairy,” Harry says. “January recipe.” Nick takes one and Harry nudges his arm
with his elbow. “You want that pint now?”

The pub’s actually doing a brisk trade thanks to some kind of folk dancing troop stopping by on their way back home from rehearsals, so Harry sneaks behind the bar and pours them two frothing glasses of Nun’s Ruin. He gestures to outside, turns on the heater, and they sit on the wall that marks the end of the beer garden.

“How’s your mouth?” Harry says, pulling his sleeves down over his hands.

“It’ll survive.” Nick swills a mouthful of beer around it. “It’s been through worse. Really my mother should’ve said no tasting — we’ll have to edit that in or we’ll get complaints.”

“I bet she’ll be chuffed to see her chutney in the paper, though.”

“Are you kidding?” Nick says. “She’ll bang on until 2025 about it not being a real paper like the Manchester Evening News.”

“Oh.” Harry kicks his heels off the wall, looking rather dejected. “How’s the muffin?”

Nick tears off a bit and pokes at its insides like Paul Hollywood would. “Seems well baked,” he says. He nibbles a bit, fearful of the combination of vinegar and muffin, and it’s a bit chewy but definitely not as bad as some of the things he’s eaten while trying to satisfy a passion for all things bad for you while on a diet. “What are they? Apple?”

Harry smiles over his beer. “Banana. You really don’t cook much, do you.”

“I like to watch people do it on telly,” Nick says. He dunks a chunk of muffin into his drink. “I’ve always got good intentions but — when you’re on your own it’s a lot of effort int’ it?”

Harry takes a sip of his beer and slowly sets his glass down, sleeves flopping like a penguin’s wings. “So you are, then?” he says. “On your own? Like —?”

His voice is cautious and soft and Nick looks at him, tries to read on his face if he’s actually asking what Nick thinks he is. “Do a joke about it being baffling when I’m such a domestic goddess,” Nick says, “and I will tip you backwards off this wall.”

Harry smiles, eyes fixed on the old picnic table that’s upended against the pub. “As if I would. S’better to be on your own, I reckon, than with —” He pauses, frowning in thought. “— I don’t want to say the wrong person but — someone you’re not, like, really into the idea of being with?”

“They’re different, are they?”

“Well — yeah? One of them’s someone you’re not suited to and the other’s someone who might be alright but you just don’t really care whether they’re there or not.”

“Common problem for you, is it, ending up with someone you’re indifferent to?”

Harry ducks his head, brushing his chin with his thumb. “Not exactly.”

Nick offers him a piece of his muffin and Harry takes a chunk and dunks it in his beer. “Know what you mean, though,” Nick says. “No point going out with someone for the sake of it, is there, or just because you might need a date to a wedding at some point in the future.”

“That’s what I meant. Like… if I don’t want to spend all my time with them even if we’re doing nothing… that’s… an issue.”
Nick has no idea what to say to that, so he lifts his glass and knocks it against Harry’s.

They drink quietly against the night in the glow of light from the bar until Nick’s phone pings with a reminder to go and stir the chutney. He runs into Anne on his way in, and they do an awkward dance trying to get past each other, end up laughing more than it really deserves. “Sorry if we’re driving off your customers with this stench.”

“Never you mind, love,” she says, touching his elbow. “Always good to see him making new, you know, friends.”

She smiles at him like she knows all about him and if Nick hadn’t had a pint he’d probably find it more disconcerting than he does.

“You’re going to be eating this until May,” Nick says, poking at the pot.

“Brilliant,” Anne says, “we’ll have a cheese and wine evening — Niall’s cheeses, Harry can bake — have you had one of his scones?” Nick shakes his head. “Get him to make you some. They’re my favourite.” She wrinkles up her nose in affection and pride and Nick wonders what the hell that feels like.

The timer pings and it’s Anne’s nachos. She reaches up to get them out of the microwave, this giant pile of chips and cheese, sprinkles them liberally with jalapenos and sour cream.

“Oh now I’m hungry,” Nick mutters.

“I’ll bring you some.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean —”

“Little thank you,” she says, “for helping him out so much with the paper.”

Nick smiles to cover what he’s thinking, which is that it’s absolutely no problem and he’s not really sure what he would’ve done without it. “Both of you,” he says, “bleeding menace to my waistline.”

By the time the chutney’s ready for putting into jars, they’re both half-pissed, which makes the whole thing a more tactile experience than Nick expected it might be, Harry’s hands all over his steadying the jar between them, both of them useless at ladling it. Harry laughs a lot, mouth right there at his shoulder, and when Nick leaves, it’s with a jar with his name and the date on, and Harry’s smile stuck all over his skin.
Merlot, is it me you're looking for?

I never really pictured having a boyfriend, I just had this hazy idea it’d be like having a best mate you also had sex with, that they’d think all the same things as you did were funny, that you’d go for fancy dinners and share your stories and not have to worry anymore about what you looked like without any clothes on. I always saw a dog in my future, though — wanted to get one as soon as I left home, but my mum would say, “Just think about it, Nick — you’ll be tied down — what if you want to go on holiday? What about when you get a job? How’d you know you’ll find somewhere to live that allows pets?”

Funny how no one ever says that about a boyfriend. No one ever says to think it through or points out all the pitfalls. So when a guy at uni gets right up in your life, they say, “It’s about bloody time,” and “What on earth does he see in you?” and “Don’t be so annoying or he’ll chuck you and then where will you be?”

It leaves you alone with the dread of being tied to a person and the way the weight of loving him threatens the future you’ve been meticulous planning. And then when you choose it instead of him, they tut about how he was the best thing that ever happened to you and whisper threats about loneliness and how a career won’t keep you warm at night, and then wonder why a decade passes and you never try again.

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Nick sits on the fire escape with a can of Diet Coke for company, rubbing at calves that are still mutinous from the run he took them on last night. He stayed out longer than he probably should’ve, checking between each tree for Harry to appear, but he never did. He wraps his coat tighter around him, wishing he had a scarf, looks at his phone again. There’s still just the one message from Harry: I’ll be a bit late x

There’s late, there’s late late, and then there’s this: freezing his arse off in the drizzle apparently indefinitely. He scrolls through his other messages — there’s a couple from his agent asking for a word count update and approximately four thousand in his pals’ WhatsApp talking about the weekend. It feels like he’s holding someone else’s phone.

The clouds roll into each other like fat, grey hamsters, and Nick sighs at the sky as it blurs with the raindrops on his lashes, longing for one of those warm mince pies Harry brought him as a tester.

A clang gets his attention and Harry jogs up the first few steps, muttering and sniffing into the back of his hand. He pushes past, gets the key out and wrestles with the door, shaking the handle and kicking at the frame three times in quick succession when it doesn’t immediately open.

“What’s up with you?”

Harry body-checks the door with a curse under his breath, but all the fight goes out of him and he slumps against it, hiding his face against the wood.
“Harry?” Nick reaches for his shoulder, and even though he sort of initiated it, he’s not really prepared for Harry turning and crumpling against him. Steadying him with an arm around his waist, Nick hums a question, head whizzing with dying cats or horrifically injured sheep or god, his mum or someone important Nick didn’t know about before. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Mrs Whitstable.” The words are foggy and come with Harry pushing into Nick’s shoulder with his forehead.

“Oh no, what —”

He turns his face so Nick can’t see it anymore. “They’ve put her in a home.”

“Oh.” Nick stands there while Harry breathes heavy and wet and angry against the bottom of his neck. He wants to say something about her at least not being dead but thinks better of it, then maybe that he should ask questions — like where it is or if it’s permanent — but he hates when people do that when he’s all emotional, so he just strokes Harry’s back. “Oh love. I’m sorry.”

Harry’s hands screw up in his jumper like he’s made it worse so Nick tightens his grip, rests his cheek against Harry’s hair.

“Just — she’s so upset and there’s Basil and —” Nick nods, even though all he really knows about Mrs Whitstable is she has problems staying upright and likes a dachshund. “— she can’t take care of herself anymore and her son, he won’t — and we’ve got stairs and no room and —”

“Oh. Oh dear.”

The clouds grumble and Nick eyes the sky, thinking that if this was a film, an intense rain shower might seem atmospheric and appropriate, but he’s wearing a coat that’s dry clean only and Harry’s hair he bets gets frizzy really easily. He fumbles for Harry’s hand, extracts the keys from where they’re becoming sweaty against his palm. “Ok, come on.”

Nick unlocks the door and steers him inside. “Why don’t you have a sit down and I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

He wheels out the wonky chair and gives Harry a little shove towards it.

Harry dutifully sits and stares at his fingers, digging his thumb into the fleshy part of his other hand until his skin goes white, releasing it, doing it again.

Nick looks around for tissues but the best he can do is a handful of rough, cheap bog roll from the loo, so he hands Harry that and squeezes his shoulder while Harry scrubs his face and blows into it with a noise that wavers between a honk and a squeak.

He looks up when Nick holds a mug of tea out for him, tries for a smile, then he puts the mug on the desk and fixes it with a gaze like he’s trying to burst it into molecules with his mind. “A home, though. How can her family — how can anyone be so selfish?” he says.

“Maybe they think it’s the right thing, getting her the best help they can?”

“Her son — he stole her tomatoes and everything.”

Nick’s not quite sure what to say to that. He’s certain there’s some vital context he’s missing but one thing he’s learned about Harry over the last few weeks is explaining his reasoning sometimes puts him on the temper scale between quietly apoplectic and loudly terse. “I’m sure they’ll have some where she is if she asks.”
Harry curls over the desk and starts scribbling on the corner of a notebook.

“So —” Nick clears his throat. “I found this woman who’s going to be on next year’s Great British Bake Off. We can definitely define her as local, if we throw out the definition and replace it with, ‘has been here once or twice on holiday’.”

“Right.”

“She could do a guest recipe and… talk about her baking inspiration and… stuff.”

Harry nods but he’s clearly not listening to anything but the sh-tsh-sh of his pen going back and forth and turning everything black.

After a good half an hour colouring, he presses his lips together and opens the laptop, spends as long fussing with the same bit of text — turning it from italics and bold then back again — huffing at the result.

Nick bites the end of the pen and doodles craft ideas half-remembered from a show starring Kirsty Allsop he watched four years ago. “You think edible personalised Christmas decorations are too twee?”

“What?” Harry says, all sharp and not very Harry-like, topping it off with a glare.

“Edible decorations.”

“Sounds stupid.”

Nick shoves the papers he was not really working on away. “Why don’t we sack this off? You’re not in the mood and —”

“We can’t just — there’s loads to do.”

“And you’re not doing any of it, are you? You’re just sat there like a soggy cloud apparently looking for an argument.” Harry huffs and folds his arms across his chest, avoiding Nick’s eyes. “So how about you go get Basil and we’ll pick Pig up and go for a nice long walk before you manage to actually find one.”

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Nick rolls Pig’s lead up into a ball in his hand, squeezing it tight and then letting it dangle free again against his thigh. She’s off through the trees after a squirrel that may or may not prove to be non-existent and Basil’s trotting happily enough between them, glancing up at Harry with his eager little pointy face and his beady currant eyes.

“I’ve never seen a dachshund with such an obvious crush before.”

Harry shoves his hands into his pockets. “I bought his affection with high calorie treats.”

He’s radiating not being in the mood for small talk so Nick gives up and lets him lead the way. They roam in silence through the wood, leaves with the colour and fragility of rust detaching and raining
down every time the wind picks up.

After a while Harry takes his phone out and opens the camera. Unlike Nick he doesn’t just snap whatever, he crouches down in the leaves and dirt and lines up a shot of the sky through the canopy of bare, tangled branches, waits for Pig and Basil to be framed perfectly against the backdrop, takes a handful of different angles and peers at the screen like he’s thinking about more than just which one to post to Instagram.

Nick takes a couple of his own: Harry walking ahead, another of him standing in the stream in his wellies, one of Basil leaping up to lick at his knees, and Pig with a stick in her mouth that’s too big for her to lift so she’s just dragging it, essentially sweeping the forest floor into a pile.

They go further than Nick’s been before, all the way up to the top of the nearest peak, where the trees fall away like the hill has a bald spot. There’s a collection of stones concreted together to make an information stand and Nick goes over to read it. A map shows all the things a person can see on a clear day from here — a cathedral sixty miles away and the borderline of several different counties. The wind’s stiff in Nick’s hair and he rubs his arms, watching as Harry walks backwards around the perimeter, eyes on his feet.

“You see Wales?” Nick shouts. “It says here you can see Wales.”

Harry shakes his head. “Too cloudy,” he shouts back. He kicks up a stick, catches it, throws it for Pig before ambling over. “Probably you can see it from that one,” he says, and he taps a bit of the map along from where they are, a higher peak, then looks up at the rolling sky. “We could try?”

“I’m not going up another bleeding hill unless there’s somewhere at the top I can get a pint and a bacon butty.”

Harry smiles. It’s slight and uncertain but more than he has all day. He nods towards the trail that brought them up here, “Basil, come on,” he says, and Basil abandons the leaves he was snorting his way through and trots over, while it takes Nick three increasingly frustrated blasts of her name to get Pig to even look at him.

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When they get back to his, the sun’s set. Nick toes off his boots, scraping the mud on the step and trying not to think about the way Pig’s grey all the way up to her knees.

Harry hovers, his hands in his coat pockets, looks over towards the clump of trees that’ll lead him home. He bites his lip. “Sorry I was in a mood,” he says.

“Not like you were in a mood with me, was it? You were in a mood with life for being shit to someone you care about. Not about to take it personally, am I.” Nick stacks his boots next to each other and gets his keys out. “What d’you want for tea, then?”

Harry squints at him, surprised.
“I do a really mediocre salmon en plate warmer,” Nick offers.

“That sounds… weird. Fishy, even,” Harry says, eyes lighting up at his own joke, but he backs up against the wall to knock the heel of his wellie against the brick anyway. He stops halfway, foot part of the boot flopping to the side. “Oh wait, it’s — we should get a curry.”

“I haven’t seen a take away — if there’s been one hiding all this time, I’ll —”

“No, it’s the — the van. It only comes every two weeks but it’s today, I’m pretty sure.”

“There’s a curry van? Like an ice cream van?”

“Tikka masala like a Mr Whippy. It does all the villages round here.”

Nick blinks at him. “Are you winding me up?”

“No. What d’you want? What’s your favourite? My treat.”

“Something not too spicy like a bhuna and a saag aloo? And a naan, maybe, to share. No Flake.”

Harry reaches down to tug his wellie back on, hopping slightly as he does it. He straightens up and holds his hand out. “Give me your keys, then, I’ll go fetch it.”

“If this has all been a ruse to nick my car —”

Harry’s face cracks into a grin like being accused of theft is the best thing that’s ever happened to him. “I’m leaving you Basil as a trade, aren’t I?”

Nick opens the front door and grabs his keys off the hook. “Mine’s got sport suspension.”

“Who says Basil hasn’t.”

He snatches Nick’s keys out of his hand before Nick can offer any more false protestation, and with a waggle of his eyebrows and a rather too gleeful acceleration, he’s gone.

Nick takes the dogs inside and gets them both rinsed of the worst of the mud, putting Basil a handful of Pig’s food in a cereal bowl that’s seen better days. He has a quick tidy, but he hasn’t been doing much that constitutes causing a mess, so that’s mostly returning a couple of glasses to the kitchen, picking up socks Pig’s brought down for no reason, and kicking her actual toys into a pile near the fireplace.

Maybe he could light the fire tonight; it’s seemed a bit of a waste when it was just him and he could more easily put another jumper on, but he’s always had a soft spot for a real fire and who knows how long it’ll be before he gets another opportunity. He whacks some logs into the stout black burner. He’s been collecting and drying kindling like an actual country person so he grabs a handful from the copper bucket next to the hearth and piles it on top. He sets fire to the first twig with his fag lighter and manages to get it going, pushes the little blackened door on the front to and watches for a moment as crackles and sparks leap against the glass. Always makes him feel like a real grown up, making fire. He rests back on his heels in front of it thinking nothing in particular until Pig comes up and nuts him in the chest.

“Yes yes, dinner guest, very exciting,” Nick says, and lets her leap into some sort of half cuddle and paw at his thighs, which was considerably less painful before she weighed a million stone.

By the time Harry comes back, it’s fully dark and his breath makes puffs of white when he gets out.
of Nick’s car. He rings the doorbell and sets Basil off howling — Pig joins in halfway through — and when Nick opens the door, Harry’s baring his teeth in a fake grin of apology.

“Welcome to choir practice,” Nick says, and Harry hands him a bottle of red wine. “You never said there was a booze van as well.”

Harry kicks off his wellies and lines them up outside, nestles the bag full of foil containers on the floor while he hangs up his coat. He takes off his hat and stuffs it in the pocket, ruffles his hair and then flicks it back.

Nick’s staring, legitimately staring, so he ducks down to retrieve the bag and says, “Starving, me.”

In the kitchen he drags plates out of the cupboard while Harry eyeballs the picture on the wall. “Who’s that? She looks familiar.”

“Came with the house.” Nick waves a bottle opener in Harry’s face. “Make yourself useful will you?”

Harry bending over with a bottle between his knees is definitely not something Nick needed to see so he busies himself spooning curry into bowls and arranging them on a tray that has a pattern of fruit and flowers on it. “What is this?” he says, poking at an unidentifiable sauce with half a boiled egg and a sliver of cucumber floating on the top.

“S’m biryani.” Harry comes up right behind him to snag the cucumber. He opens the cupboard next to Nick’s head and ignores the stemmed ones, clinks two short cafe glasses together as he gets them down. “I’ve a bad history with wine glasses,” he says.

Before too long they’re sat on the sofa under the beams with plates on their knees and a naan and poppadum on the coffee table. Pig and Basil sit hopefully on the other side, eyes trained to see who might be the first to drop a bit of something not too spicy. Way Pig’s whimpering Nick doesn’t really fancy Basil’s chances unless Harry’s going to drop some chicken right in his mouth.

Nick puts his feet up next to his glass of wine and spears some pepper with his fork. “Not bad for out the back of a van. One thing I miss since I moved south — decent curry.”

Following his cue, Harry tucks his feet up onto the sofa, his woolly sock maddeningly wrinkled in a way Nick desperately wants to straighten. “They always have the popular stuff but if you phone with enough notice, they’ll bring you anything on the menu.”

“Where’s the actual restaurant?”

“You know where Asda is?”

“Nearly.”

“Well it’s just past there.” Nick nods and breaks off a bit of poppadum. He’s absolutely not thinking about what it might be like to sit across the table from Harry in an actual restaurant with a candle on the table, ordering three dishes between them because they can’t decide and stealing little bits of each other’s like people he usually hates. “The pakora travel reasonably well, the cauliflower bhaji separates a bit which can be a tad disappointing.”

“Bear that in mind. What if you want Thai or… I don’t know… Chinese?”

Harry swallows a mouthful of rice, helps it down with some wine. “Noodle buffet bar,” he says, and when Nick looks perplexed he adds, “you have to go up to the service station on the motorway.
That’s the closest Starbucks too, if you’re wondering.”

“You do ‘em both at once, make a night of it?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, “it’s always rammed with people on dates.” He stops, tilts his head. “Well not *rammed* but there’ll always be one or two couples sitting in the window.”

“He’s bragging about the size of the engine in his tractor and she’s staring into a cappuccino regretting her life choices?”

“Because everyone who lives here is a stereotype.”

Nick rolls his eyes. “Is it like a thing, then? Like ‘*are you coming in for coffee?’* only ‘*are we going on for noodles?’*”

“Totally. If you’ve gone on a date there you’ve gone quite a long way, though.” Harry pulls a hunk of naan off the plate sitting between them and chews on it, thoughtful. “So even if they’re really boring and awful you might go for noodles anyway because who knows when you’ll get another chance? The noodles might be sweet, the rest sour, it’s —”

“We’ve all been on worse.”

“Have we.”

He looks right at Nick and Nick wants to say something horribly revealing, but Basil saves him from himself by deciding this is his moment and darting over to scrabble up Harry’s leg.

“You won’t like it,” Harry says, but he holds a bit of lesser-charred naan out for him anyway.

Basil takes it — Pig looks murderous — dropping it then trying to scoop it up again with what is clearly the wrong part of his mouth for the task. “S’better for him than paper at least,” Nick says. “He been trying that again?”

“No, but only because I’m limiting his opportunities,” Harry says. “He’s wily, though — he can look at a room and plot a route over the furniture to a magazine he couldn’t reach otherwise and he’ll, like, pull stuff over to get to it? Mrs W was always saying, ‘don’t put that there, it’s too close to that stool and all he’s got to do is nudge it closer to the table’ or whatever. I thought she was exaggerating.”

Nick smiles around a forkful of rice. “Maybe he can teach Pig a thing or two. She still hasn’t really learnt tables aren’t a thing you can run through.” He pushes a chunk of lamb back and forth, trying to fit all these new little bits of Harry together. “So you and this Mrs Whitstable, you been pals long?”

“Yeah.” Harry tucks his hair behind his ear and chases what might be a mushroom around his plate. “Used to sit with her on the bus on the way back from school.”

Nick does the maths on that. He hasn’t really thought about it much — in London Harry being younger wouldn’t mean anything at all — but for all his surface steadiness he still lives with his mum and kicks doors when he’s angry. “Preferred her to people your own age?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Harry shrugs, takes a sip of his wine. “She used to let me pick half her numbers for The Pools. We won thirty quid once on Spot the Ball and she made me promise not to spend my half on anything sensible.”

“What d’you buy?”
“Honestly?”

Nick nods.

“Lube. And a bus ticket to far enough away my mum wouldn’t hear about me buying lube.”

Laughing, Nick settles further down the sofa, resting his plate on the arm. He can’t imagine growing up somewhere like this, somewhere literally everyone knew who you were and what your business was, somewhere the bus was a place to hang out with pensioners instead of avoiding kids from school who’d been storing up insults all day. Or maybe that’s a part of the tale Harry’s not telling, because Nick hadn’t thought about it before, but Harry would hardly have needed his help with the paper if his life was brimming over with school friends who’d made it here from the past. “You always lived out here then, out in the take away desert?”

“Pretty much. Since mum got divorced, anyway.”

“You see your dad at all?”

“In the holidays.” Nick must make a face because Harry adds, “Don’t look at me like that, it’s nothing bad. Not anymore.” Harry scoops up a bit of potato with the naan he didn’t give to Basil and feeds it onto his tongue. “We’re fine,” he says, before he’s really swallowed it. “Mum’s got a date next week, actually. Met him online. I’m trying to be cool with it.”

“Not succeeding, though,” Nick says, and Harry snorts. “She going for noodles?”

“Please don’t talk about my mum and… noodles.”

“Why not? Attractive woman, your mum. I bet —”

Harry glares at him.

Nick relents with a snigger. “Maybe I’ll come over for a pint, help keep your mind off it.”

Harry’s eyes flick down Nick’s body and back up again. “Done,” he says.

Stomach churning like he’s swallowed a bag of squirrels, Nick finishes off his curry and slides his plate onto the table, jostling the bowls of leftovers perilously close to the edge of the other side of the table. Pig gets up, wagging her tail enthusiastically, so Nick snaps off a bit of poppadum and holds it out for her. She breathes in at the same time as trying to take it and gets it stuck to the end of her nose.

“Oh what are you like,” Nick mutters, and she exhales it onto the floor and snuffles after it.

Harry’s smiling at him while he mops the last of his biryani sauce up with his naan and once his plate’s neatly stacked on top of Nick’s, Harry settles back, cradling his wine against his stomach. “’M stuffed.”

“Big tick for the curry van.”

“Every two weeks,” Harry says, ducking his head down. “Anytime you want to get one, just let me know and —”

He doesn’t say it’s a date but it’s in the air, making all the hairs on Nick’s arm stand up. He tops up Harry’s glass and then his own and fiddles with his phone, murmuring about music. “Haven’t been able to work out the stereo system thing so we’ll have to do it old school.” He selects a mix of stuff
he was really into a month or so ago and drops his phone into the poppadum bowl to make a speaker. The first track out is thankfully neither offensively-sweary rap nor anything too low and slinky, and Nick settles back to stare at the fire, in front of which Basil and Pig are both in the process of sprawling out.

Harry glances at Basil. “You think he’s all right?”

“Misses his pal a bit, maybe.”

“She wants me to keep him. You think I should?”

“I think you already decided,” Nick says, and Harry sniffs and looks down like it’s something to be embarrassed about. Nick pokes his shoulder. “Reckon he’s landed on his feet, having you to take care of him.” Harry’s cheek dimples and Nick swills his wine around. “Maybe she planned the whole thing so you’d take him and his paper-eating ways off her hands.”

“It’s the only logical explanation,” Harry says, with a sigh.

“Will you be able to visit? Take him in for her?”

“I hate hospitals, anywhere like that.”

“You work in a vet’s, though?”

Harry shrugs and stares into the fire. “‘S different.”

“How?”

“I know the people there. I know they’ll do their best and I know how to help.” He closes his eyes for just a moment and Nick knows that behind them is someone he loved and a horrible memory of wards and curtains and something not going the best way it could’ve.

“Come with you, if you want.”

Harry looks over. “Would you?”

“‘Course.”

His smile is slow and cautious, like he doesn’t want to put his full weight on the idea in case it won’t hold him up. “This weekend?” he says. “Are you free?”

“I mean I’ll have to check with my personal assistant,” Nick says. “Hey Pig, can we squeeze Harry in for a few hours?” Pig looks up from the rug but doesn’t lift her head. “Ok get back to me.”

Harry laughs into his glass, hugs one of his knees to his chest while the other foot inches closer to Nick’s leg. “Do you have one, in London? A PA and all that?”

“Sometimes,” Nick says. If he dropped his hand he might land it on Harry’s foot. Accidentally. Casually. “Although —” He hesitates, because he’s not sure how to tell the story, now. But Harry’s looking at him all smiley and curious so he just edits a few details on the sly. “I had this friend sort of working for me and one day they went to get my dry cleaning. I had this do to go to — real posh one — and it wasn’t until ten minutes before I was supposed to be leaving the house I discovered they’d picked up the wrong thing and where there should’ve been a tuxedo there was a pair of flowery silk pyjamas.”

“What d’you do?”
“Wore them anyway with a nice coat. Grayson Perry said I looked quite fabulous, which may ultimately prove to be the highlight of my entire life.” He leaves out the lesser pleasant comments from the Daily Mail about how his choice of garb sparked concerns from his friends about his ability to cope with the demands of his various commitments. “Never did find out who they belonged to. Or get my suit back.”

Harry smiles, inches his toes closer to Nick’s leg, rests his elbow on the back of the sofa to make a platform of his palm for his head. “Do you miss it? Not the suit. In, like, general.”

“Miss the internet and my friends,” Nick says, thumbs at his heart tattoo, “but the reasons I left, not so much.”

Harry nods, smiles all small and understanding, and goes back to drinking his wine.

Nick lets his hand rest next to Harry’s foot. It feels neither accidental nor casual. “Sorry this is bugging me,” he says, and he tugs the sock up and rearranges it so all the wrinkles are even. “And Christ, what kind of journalist are you? You not even going to ask for any gruesome details?”

“If they’re gruesome why would you want to talk about it?”

“Maybe I want to be vague about it in order to appear all mysterious and deep?”

“Why would I want to listen to you be fake mysterious and deep?”

“Because it’s what people do on —” The word dates lodges in Nick’s soft palate like a bit of pointy, broken poppadum. “Friday night.”

Harry stretches his leg and digs his toes into Nick’s thigh. The pressure of them says he did not buy that at all and heat creeps all the way up Nick’s chest to settle under the neck of his jumper. Nick grabs his foot and keeps hold of it and Harry’s grinning. Actually grinning. “Tell me about Pig,” he says. “I want all your Pig stories. How you met, where you went puppy training, tell me all the details.”

So Nick does.

By the time he’s finished, Harry’s cried with laughing about the time Nick accidentally got himself in the dick with a ball thrower — not the regular way, no, he threw the thrower part by accident, javelined the bastard thing in the ground and then somehow ran into it and almost impaled himself — and clutched his arm through the time she escaped and nearly got hit by a car. He nods all the way through Nick talking about crate training and how it never really worked out for them, tells Pig off for all the times she raided Nick’s bin when he was at work, asks a load of questions about her favourite spot to go walking and the first time she met a sheep.

Nick goes to lift his glass, finds it empty.

Bottle is too.

“You want another?” Nick says. “I think there’s a wine cellar.”

They sneak through the door in the kitchen and down a set of steps that seem to be slabs of sand rather than anything more substantial.

Nick lights up his phone, having abandoned the search for the light switch, and leads Harry down around the curve of the wall, him so close his breath tickles Nick’s neck. Halfway down he loses his footing and grabs hold of the back of Nick’s jumper, sniggering and colliding with him.
The room opens up into a curve of brick ceiling and a wall of bottles with a sandy floor. “Bloody hell,” Nick says, flashing the light of his phone over it, “they could at least have broken them up by country like they do in Sainsbury’s.”

Harry goes over, digs his phone out of his pocket too and peers at the row. He shuffles in his socks — they are going to be a write-off — and lifts one out of the rack, sand and dust and god knows what spilling off it. “Which country we looking for?” Harry pulls another one out of the rack, grimacing like a chimp at the noise of gravel grinding against itself as the bottle moves.

“I don’t know I just think it would’ve been a good idea to be a bit more organised.”

Harry laughs, creating a little cloud of dust and dirt, which makes him cough and laugh even more until he’s bent over and doing both at once into his sleeve.

A spider drops down from the ceiling and Nick doesn’t mean to shriek but it happens anyway, and he leaps back from it, swatting at the air. “Oh god I hate creepy crawlies,” he says.

Harry extracts another bottle, wipes his finger over the label. “What about this one? It says Merlot 1983?”


~*~

He wakes up gradually rather than all at once like he has been lately. There’s a weight on him and in little bits it solidifies that it isn’t Pig because she’s in front of the dwindled fire with all her paws in the air. He cranks his eyes further open.

Harry’s curled half on top of him. He’s wedged between Nick and the back of the sofa, his knee tucked under Nick’s, Basil tucked in turn under the crook of his arm, both of their heads on Nick’s chest. They’re agonisingly cute sleepers and Nick’s breath sticks in his throat.

Nick squints through the gap in the curtains to the strip of greyish light. He’s not quite as au fait with using the sun as a clock as he was once, but the darkness has started to lift, so he shifts under Harry just enough to inch him towards consciousness.

When Harry murmurs, Nick runs his fingers up his arm in a light tickle, and whispers, “You got to go to work?”

Harry groans.

“Can you sleep or do you have to go?” He keeps his voice soft in case Harry’s got the day off. “Just answer quick, love, and I’ll leave you alone.”

Harry hides his face in Nick’s jumper, screwing it up under his nose like a pillow with a low, “Nnnnghhhhhrrrr,” of protest that eventually turns into a yes. He works his way up off Nick’s chest, his hair fuzzy with static and his cheek crumpled. He checks his watch, scratches at his head.
and sits there for a moment, palms on Nick’s sternum, swaying slightly before he opens his eyes all
the way and then some. He gives Nick a sleepy blink, pushes his nose back and forth with his
knuckles, and points at the door. He murmurs his way into a word. “….d take Basil out first.”

“Leave him, I’ll do it, I’ll look after him.” Like he’s concurring, Basil burrows into Nick’s armpit.
Nick tickles the back of his head, while ignoring the hand he’s somehow managed to get trapped
between the back of the sofa and Harry’s arse. “Bring me a croissant?”

“Ok,” Harry says. His gaze drifts down to Nick’s mouth. “Ok,” he adds, more emphatically, and he
ducks down to skim Nick’s cheek with a kiss before heaving himself up on the sofa cushions, and
flailing over the arm to the door.
When I was a teenager I was obsessed with kissing; the idea that someone might like you enough to do weird things with their tongue against yours seemed to have a sort of magic in it. I lost valuable days of revision time to wondering what Craig David did it like, if he’d be a flutttery breather all over your mouth or like it when you drew inaccurate patterns across the back of his shirt. Turns out he’s actually more of an awkward but noisy peck type of person and his aftershave smells like mouthwash, which goes to prove there’s no point guessing about these things and that saying about never meeting your idols goes double for if you fancy them.

Truth be told I’ve kissed more people than teenage me would ever have thought feasible as a fantasy. But I never quite gave it up, this deep down secret inkling that kissing could be more than mouths and fingers and feelings — that if you did it right, you might suddenly forget to be lonely and anxious or lose in it those bits of yourself you spend your entire life pretending aren’t there.

So. Obsessed with kissing. Proficient in it, probably. And also a little bit terrified of it — not of it in general, not of cataloguing flutttery breathing and aftershave smells — but of that one I always suspected was lurking in wait for me, the one where the physicality of it would be irrelevant, where you’d come away from it surrounded by this terrible magic, crackling with the idea that love actually exists.

~*~

Harry lets himself back in with a, “Hey sleepy,” a bag of something that smells deliciously bready and a flask of coffee clutched to his chest. He’s changed into a plaid shirt that looks older than he is and he nudges Nick’s leg with his toes.

Nick feigns irritation from his position prone on the sofa, where he’s been dozing with Pig and Basil and another book about Gerald, who’s herding metaphorical cows this time. He scoots up the sofa far enough to make room and takes the bag, peering inside at a selection of pastries. They’re those ones everyone’s nana likes with custard inside, too glossy and perfect for them to have been write-offs. Nick takes one and balances it on his knee while Harry goes into the kitchen and finds some mugs. He never thought about someone actually making these cakes. He supposes he always knew someone did, they didn’t just appear by magic in fancy window displays, but staring at one now it seems particularly far-fetched that Harry makes them. He knows how to make glossy flaky pastry and fill it with custard that he also made. Hungover. And this is not even what he’s chosen to do with his life. It’s mind-boggling. He accepts a coffee from the flask when Harry comes back and tries to look like he’s thinking something normal. “Busy?”

“Always is Saturday morning. Everyone wants a chat.”

“So do people come for the food or to flirt with you?”

“Bit of both, probably.” Harry rips Nick’s pastry in two, scoops the custard out of his half and dips his fingers into his mouth. He closes his eyes as he sucks and bloody hell, that’s probably against a lot of health and safety regulations if he does it while he’s serving. “Can I borrow your computer?” he says, looking around for it. “I think I got a whatyoumcallit, like, a lead.”
Nick waves at where it is on the table in the conservatory, a spot he picked mostly because it lends itself to taking dramatic-looking selfies when it’s raining and he thought that was quite writerly.

Harry flops down on the cushion next to him having retrieved it. He opens the lid and his eyes flicker over the document Nick was working on, an anecdote about Craig David that came off the rails somewhere between taking said dramatic writerly-looking selfies and thinking about Harry while listening to Frank Ocean. “This your book? Did you save it? Shall I close it?” Nick smiles in awkward agreement thinking losing some of it to a save-fail might be the best thing for it. Harry rests his feet on the coffee table and the laptop on his thighs. “Mr Pritchard told me the vicar’s, like, on Twitter now and she’s been tweeting some stuff that’s newsworthy.”

“Can’t he just follow the Kardashians like a normal person?”

“Who?” Harry slurps his coffee. “Anyway, the vicar wants to do up the church but no one cares because, you know, organised religion. So she’s tweeting TV companies trying to get a reality-style makeover but none of them are responding b—”

“— because a vicar with a dodgy steeple is no match for reruns of the Kardashians?”

Harry tilts his head with weary displeasure at Nick for not taking his lead seriously. “The windows are, like, the big problem. So I’m thinking we follow the campaign and see if we can help it to succeed? Then it’s like a Christmas miracle, vicar win d’overs reluctant congregation? Headline something like, amazing grace… only a-glazing… mace?”

“Even if that made sense Amazing Grace isn’t a Christmas carol.”

Harry rolls on his lip, staring at the screen where Twitter is stubbornly not loading. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s a lonely aunty funeral classic, though. Maybe if the vicar gets really ill and as her dying wish —”

“No. We are not wishing death on the vicar for the sake of the front page. Not even as a joke.”

“Needs a bit of drama is all I’m saying,” Nick huffs, looking up at the beams while he thinks. “Ok I got it. How d’you feel about Steve Coogan?”

“Like, in general? Sort of…” Harry trails off. “I guess I kind of liked him in that film where he goes on a trip? I think I gave it three stars. I could look it up?”

Nick rolls his eyes. “I meant do you think the vicar has some kind of PR budget for a celebrity to come and get a photo taken?”

“A what?”

“It’s a thing. I’m seeing it like….” Nick waves a circle. “…vicar gives TV companies five gold rings, four calling birds tell her to sod off, three French doors with two dovetail joints arrive mysteriously? For the grand re-opening of the church with its fabulous new windows we get Steve Coogan and put him up a tree outside. You take the picture, Partridge in a Pear Tree: famous bloke comes to aid of local vicar after seeing plight on Twitter, Christmas spirit lives, crowd goes wild.”

Harry blinks at him and after a very long moment he says, “That’s genius.”

“It’s puns and an unnecessary celebrity hook masquerading as news. Which never happens in real journalism, obviously.”
Harry’s chin juts out. “Are you calling the *Argus* not a real paper? After I brought you pastries and everything.” Harry mock huffs and flips the laptop shut. “How much, then? For the Partridge thing?”

“Ten will probably do it.”

“Pounds?”

“Grand.”

“Oh.” Harry frowns and runs his fingers over the top of Nick’s laptop. “I think if she had that money she’d probably just, like, spend it on the windows?” He picks at the corner of a sticker. “How many days is it ’til Christmas? Are we ever going to find something?”

“Worst comes to worst we’ll do a full page spread on Mabel and whether she’s predicting a white one. You take the picture, I’ll doodle a Santa hat on her, hashtag Moo-rry Christmas.” Harry looks at Nick like he’s already doing the graphics on it in his head. “We are *not* doing that.”

“I’m editor and I say we’re keeping it in reserve.”

They eat the rest of the pastries talking about films they like – Harry’s mostly into cheesy romcoms and *Babe: Pig in the City* and Nick tries to pretend he’s disappointed in the revelation – then take the dogs for a walk through the wood to work off the custard. They knock elbows and laugh at the way Basil tries to keep up with Pig and she runs literal circles around him, tackle the mid-size hill, and then head back down to the village, where the shops are already closing.

“You want to get something for later?” Harry says, gesturing at the line out of the Bakery’s door.

“Sure.”

While they wait Harry makes small talk with a woman and her three kids who are all pressed to the window display like something in a Dickens cartoon. He introduces Nick – who gets a raised eyebrow of intrigue – and clearly he knows them well enough to ask about a school fancy dress thing and how everyone’s doing with their swimming lessons. The kids are only saved from being interrogated about their grades by Basil, who goes for a copy of *The Mirror* poking out of the wicker basket of the guy in front. Harry snatches him up and rubs his knuckles gently on his snout in admonishment as he tucks him under his arm.

Nick tries to squint down at the headline because *The X Factor* logo is at the top but all he can really make out is that something warranting a grainy photo of Simon Cowell has occurred and really that could be anything.

Barbara blows air out of her mouth like a hurricane as she waves off the last customer. “Everyone loves those mince pies of yours,” she says, “you know there’s such a thing as *too* popular.”

Harry grins. “Any of that quiche left, Barbara?”

“Couple of slices of the feta and pine nuts, you want ‘em?”

“That’d be amazing.”

Making a strained noise as she reaches into the window to grab the right stand, Barbara mutters that if she ate what Harry does she’d never be able to get into her fancy jeans again. She funnels the quiche into a bag. “You want to take those pork pies as well? They’ll only go off.”

“I’ll be the size of a house,” Nick mutters.
“I keep telling you, come jogging with me more often.”

“And I told you I will, once I find where I left my more athletic body.”

Harry slow blinks at him like he’s debating whether or not to say something flirty, but the look switches from Nick’s face at the jangle of the bell over the door.

Nick follows his gaze. There stands a guy who’s that sort of good looking that says he works outdoors but is fabulously rich – tall, tousle haired, tanned – and Nick flushes, some kind of offended at the magnet he is for Harry’s attention.

“Any chance of a loaf?” the guy says with a smile that looks like it’s benefiting from the best Instagram filter.

“For you? Every chance,” Harry says.

He lands a big flat hand on Harry’s shoulder and squeezes. “You’re a life saver.”

“A loaf-saver, actually.” Harry nips behind the counter and appears with a granary topknot with walnuts on the crust that was 100% not part of the display. He waits for some kind of reaction to his joke but none comes, so he wraps the loaf up with a flourish of paper bag and takes the money, laughing a bit too much when the guy says he hopes they’re doing ok for change because he’s only got a twenty.

Of course he’s only got a twenty. He probably sweats twenties. Sexily. Not like Nick sweats when he’s puffed his way up a hill and back.

“Love this time of year,” the guy says.

Harry nods like they’re sharing a really profound connection. “Same.”

“Well, enjoy your evening.” The guy pockets his change and strides out the door, whistling, to slide into a sleek black sports car so fancy Nick doesn’t even know the name of it. On the backseat sit two perfectly-groomed afghan hounds who don’t even go for the loaf when he sets it on the seat next to him.

“Ready?” Harry says and hands Nick the bag of quiche. It’s a brutal reminder that two minutes ago Nick lived in a world where it was possible to do something other than stare out of a window consumed with resentment that someone exists. “Just get some bits to go with this shall we? See you Monday, Barbara.”

Harry takes Nick to the little supermarket where apparently there is a salad bar if you can navigate the traps of the fruit and veg display. He fills little tubs with roasted tomatoes and olives and shredded lettuce, handing them off to Nick, who stupidly didn’t pick up a basket and ends up juggling them like some kind of very inept shoplifter. “Oh for fuck’s —” Nick drops the olives and Harry retrieves them and places the tub back on top of the pile.

“You want to get frozen yoghurt too? It's from Niall’s farm.”

“Might as well do a big shop,” Nick mutters. “At this rate we’ll need your friend to give us a lift home.”

Confusion flutters across Harry’s face, then dissolves into a concerned dip between his brows. He leans past Nick and ferrets in the freezer. “He’s married,” Harry says quietly, like he’s saying it to the cow on the front of the Merry Berry yoghurt he’s just picked up and not to Nick at all, “very very
married. Just, you know, for information.” He lifts his gaze slowly to Nick’s.

Nick tries to keep his face steady like the marital status of a total stranger isn’t even relevant. “I always think afghan hounds are snooty, anyway.”

Harry shoves the cold lump of a tub into Nick’s chest. “You’re paying,” he says, with a grin.

When they finally start walking back, it’s dark and an owl is hooting indignantly in the wood. “Can we watch a film or something? Or have you got work to do?” Harry turns around to step through the bracken with his hands in his pockets.

A bit of Nick’s still smarting that Harry’s eyes work when they look at other people but a larger and more pressing bit doesn’t want to spend the evening alone with the cursor blinking at him. “I can take the night off,” he says. “But we’re not watching *Babe*.”

“Why not?”

“Anything with talking animals in it makes me paranoid Pig could do it, she just doesn’t trust me enough.”

“That’s –” Harry frowns at him. “Why would you think she wouldn’t trust you?”

“If you could do something out of the ordinary, would you trust me with it?”

“I –” Harry considers him for a moment before offering him a, “yes?”

“Well maybe she knows me better than you do,” Nick says, and fumbles for his keys.

Once they’re inside, Nick lights the fire and Harry sorts the dinner out. Somehow he finds an actual olive tray and some tiny little forks for skewering them and he lays everything out on the table in the conservatory with two glasses of wine and a candle that’s melted so far it’s less candle and more a pool of nobly wax with a wick in.

They both watch as the dogs scamper around the garden in the scant light from the house, Pig gambolling and careening and Basil trotting after her. “Think you’ve been replaced as his number one crush.”

“It was time,” Harry says, very seriously. “Was never going to work out. It’s good he’s finally accepted it.”

The quiche turns out to be an excellent call and Nick asks for the recipe, even though the last time he attempted to cook anything in the region of a flan it was at school and somehow he upturned it on the bus and all its insides bled out of his bag without him noticing. He tells Harry about the crab-walk he did all the way home with a crotch full of strawberry jelly and how his mum went ballistic when he walked in, thinking he’d been in some kind of horrible accident. Harry’s laugh is especially enthralling in the candlelight and when he goes to the loo, Nick sneaks his phone out and types a tweet:

*When there’s nothing really happening but you’re having a great time.*

He adds the heart eyes emoji and a swirl, turns his phone off before he can even see if it’s sent and gulps some wine, which is bound to help. He picks a pine nut off the leftover quiche and nibbles on it while Pig clatters in, leaping up at his knees until he gives her a pat on the head and a bit of cheese in greeting.
“She’ll have nightmares,” Harry says. He tucks his hair behind his ear as he collects the plates, and he fits so nicely in the room and with the view, he could’ve lived here for years. “You want to wash or dry?”

When all the plates are squared away and Harry’s rearranged Nick’s fridge according to the way you’re actually supposed to arrange a fridge, Harry chooses a film Nick has already seen fourteen hundred times from his laptop and they settle down to watch it. The crackle of the fire warms the wine as they cradle it, evening slipping on like a comfy cardigan Nick didn’t know he’d missed not wearing. He watches Harry more than the film if he’s honest, catching his smiles in the reflection when the screen goes dark enough, sneaking glances under cover of checking if his glass needs refreshing, and they’re halfway through when Harry laughs at something so quick and unexpected he spills his wine over his hand and on the bottom of his shirt. He sucks at his skin, eyes darting from Nick to the screen and back, and in the bite of his lip Nick sees questions, an insecurity that’s not usually there.

Having already been needlessly snide about someone’s dogs Nick figures he’s got nothing to lose and rests his arm across the back of the sofa, like an invite.

Harry keeps his eyes on the film — or the vague area of it, anyway, and nestles down, curve of his head brushing the inside of Nick’s elbow. A very important lesson about family and responsibility is happening on the screen and Nick misses the entire thing trying to breathe like he usually does and feeling like he’s doing it incredibly loud.

The rest of the film plays out far quicker than he remembered and at the roll of the credits, Harry yawns just dramatically enough that Nick can’t tell if it’s genuine or a hint. “You want me to walk you home?” Nick says. “Pig needs to go out for a wee anyway.”

Harry traces a pattern on his leg with his finger. “Would it be all right if I stayed? Mum’s not in and — we can go and see Mrs Whitstable in the morning?”

There’s a tiny pull of hesitation in Nick’s stomach. Staying over, meeting this woman, it means winding himself a little tighter in the threads of Harry’s life and he came here, in part, to get away from everyone’s life threads and focus on his own. Still he says, “Yeah, sure,” because the thought of saying no – of Harry going back to a pub that’s full and also empty – and rattling about here on his own in what would now be an absence of Harry makes him itchy on the inside of his skin. He fumbles his way up off the sofa and offers Harry his hand to pull him up. They collide and Nick laughs a little out of nerves. “You want to go up? I’ll just let these two out.”

He watches Pig do a lap of the garden snuffling in all her favourite grass and Basil choose a spot by the greenhouse and get it over and done with, hugs his arms to himself to try and keep the cold out. When they’re both inside, he gets two glasses of water and heads up the stairs with Pig clippy-clopping after him, affronted that Basil’s apparently decided to take her bed.

Harry’s hovering on the landing, doing a bad job of pretending to be looking at a collection of pictures of wildlife, like the faint watercolour of swans in a pond is the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. “Wasn’t sure which room,” he says.

“Take your pick. That’s me.” Nick nods towards the one he usually sleeps in, sets one glass down on the chest of drawers he’s been using as a bedside table. “Can share, if you —”

Harry bites his lip and takes the remaining glass of water, sets it down on the other side of the bed on the flat wooden chair Nick usually drapes a hoodie on in case he gets cold in the night.

Nick pulls his jumper off like he would normally, but there’s nothing normal about it to his insides
and Christ, it’s not like he’s never done this before. While Harry slips into the en suite, he does his own bad impression of someone not listening to the flush of the toilet and the gurgle of the pipes. He undoes his jeans and chucks them into the laundry hamper, gets under the duvet, and pulls it right up to his chin, chill air nipping at his legs.

Pig sits outside the door to the bathroom waiting until Harry’s done, greets him with a nose to the crotch and a wag of her tail. He dances around her, undoing the buttons of his shirt with one hand. It falls away from him framing his torso before he slips it off, t-shirt he’s wearing underneath clinging to him. He hops out of his jeans, retrieves his phone from his pocket, and switches the light off like it’s all one gymnastic move.

The outline of Harry’s body, the silhouette of it, is apparently sort of ingrained on Nick’s eyeballs, all he can see even when the mattress is dipping with Harry’s weight next to him.

“Can I trust you to be a gentleman?” Nick says, like he’s in an afternoon movie, one of those black and white ones where all the sets are painted on four feet of cardboard and yet somehow it’s all so much more real than Hollyoaks.

Harry breathes out a laugh and turns to arrange his pillow. “What time you want to get up?” Harry says, lights them up with his phone.

Nick’s still clutching the duvet with both hands and he consciously uncurls his fingers and tells himself to stop being so fucking ridiculous. “Whenever, I don’t mind.”

“Ok,” he says. “I’m going marimba at ten to six.”

“You better be joking.”

Sniffing a laugh, Harry stows his phone and settles on the pillow, running his foot down Nick’s leg until he finds a good spot for it between his ankles.

For the second time in as many hours Nick finds himself trying to breathe like a normal person and not the same way Pig does when there’s a roast in the oven. He inches in a bit, brushing rucks of t-shirt and chest together, and Harry’s smile fades. He looks up all big-eyed and glassy, and there it is, the thing Nick’d been afraid of, the surge of being serious together in the dark.

Nick’s breath turns to a door wedge in his throat, holding it open like otherwise he might suffocate on the future before it has a chance to happen.

“So,” Harry says.

Whatever this is, Nick didn’t come here looking for it. Write his book, redefine how people saw him, start over with projects as yet unspecified — that was his plan. And now there’s a vet nurse baker who knows famous cows looking at him all expectant and he doesn’t know which one of them is going to get hurt, only that it seems quite probable one of them will because someone always does. Normally he only cares that the person who gets hurt isn’t him.

“You snore?” Nick says.

“No,” Harry says, all offended. “If I did you’d have noticed last night, wouldn’t you?”

“Not necessarily, I had a lot of red wine last night.”

In retrospect that’s probably where he went wrong this evening. Another glass and all this inconvenient thinking wouldn’t be happening. Two and Harry’s pants would be on the other side of
the room by now.

“Well I don’t.” Harry shifts and at the rustle of the duck feathers underneath him, whatever was going on between them doesn’t seem to be there anymore. “‘Night, Nick,” he says, and plants a quick kiss on Nick’s chin before turning over and snuggling back against his chest.

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When the alarm goes off Harry’s not where Nick left him.

Nick bolts upright and skirts the edges of a panic-based asthma attack until downstairs someone belts out a line from Christina Aguilera. He flops back on the pillow, clutching his chest as Harry clangs about in a way that suggests he has the intention of cooking something he thinks should know it’s beautiful. It’s a voice Nick would definitely have taken to Judges’ Houses so Nick listens to him bastardise the verse twice before he throws a jumper on and lopes down to join him.

Pig leaps at Nick before he’s even fully down the stairs. He scoops her up and takes her into the kitchen, tickling her belly. “I hope you didn’t wake our guests up,” he says.

“Nah.” Harry comes over and blows a raspberry on her tummy. It’s gross and cute and Nick can’t handle it this early in the morning.

“I need a coffee,” he says.

Harry nods at the pot on the stove and goes back to the cheese he was grating for the omelette sizzling in the pan next to it, fends Basil off from trying to scrabble his way up his leg for some. “You’ll make yourself sick,” he says, “down,” and honestly it’s a bit impressive how Basil immediately plants his little arse on the floor. Harry glances at Nick’s legs. “You’re doing the thing with the no trousers again.”

“I’ll put some on before we leave,” Nick says. “Probably.”

Harry smirks and his gaze lingers just a little bit too long on Nick’s thighs.

An hour later, Harry’s driving Nick’s car because he said he knew the way but not the directions — the flimsiest excuse Nick has ever heard. He’s wearing one of Nick’s jumpers because his shirt had wine down the front and a pair of Nick’s boots, and smelling of his shower gel, a chocolatey effort Nick picked out at Liberty thinking it perfect for cold autumn mornings. It suits him, being covered in Nick’s things, and Nick can see him curled up against the headboard in another one of his jumpers — maybe the stripy one he said he liked the other day — and his ridiculous wellie socks, with a book on his knees, Pig on one side, and Basil on the other.

In his lap, Basil kneads Nick’s leg and Nick checks Pig’s reflection in the wing mirror to see how jealous she is. She’s not happy, but not trying to eat the flowers they picked, even though Harry went to the trouble of choosing the non-toxic ones.
The home is nothing like the one Nick’s nana went into when some horrible disease took away her brain — it’s a manor house or some such grand square building with one of those gardens that looks like a knitting pattern with neatly-segmented patches of grass and colour. They pull up in the visitor carpark and Harry hops out, pushing his hair back behind his ears. Unease sits in the way he bites at his lip, but he takes Basil from Nick with a chipper, “Let’s go see your mum, shall we?”

Basil trots by Harry’s side, his stumpy little tail wagging and his feet almost a blur keeping up with Harry’s stride as he makes for reception. Pig on the other hand lollops into Nick’s knees and nearly knocks him over in her keenness to get into the flowerbeds. “Behave,” Nick hisses, and Pig’s looking at him so she walks into the door.

In front of them sits a desk like a hotel check-in where a young guy in a white shirt and a burgundy v neck is tapping away on a computer while classical music pipes out from a speaker above their heads. He starts as they approach, and he must be new because he fumbles the pen for them to sign in with and the directions for Mrs Whitstable’s room, follows them halfway down the hall telling them to call 0 if there’s anything they need then coming back to tell them it’s actually a 9 and he doesn’t know why he said that. “Settling in real nice, she is,” he says. “Er — I’ll get you a vase for those, shall I, Mr Grimshaw?” He shoots an uncertain glance at the flowers before he scurries away again.

Pig bounces off the corridor’s walls and gets her lead tangled around her paw, but they find the right room eventually. It’s called the Blackbird Suite according to the sign outside and Harry just stands and stares at it like he’s afraid he won’t be able to handle what’s on the inside.

Nick touches his back to say he’s there, and Harry takes a big breath and fixes his smile in place. By the time he’s through the door, it looks as if he wouldn’t even swap being here for by the pool in an all-inclusive hotel in the Caribbean.

Mrs Whitstable, bless her, is in a bit of a state, propped up in bed on fourteen different pillows with a dressing gown in red velour pulled up right under her chin and a drip in an arm that’s more purple bruise than arm. Her face is shrunken back around a roman nose, and her hair says she had it done once in the eighties and then stuck with it, just adding progressively more hairspray to keep it in place. She peers at Harry with eyes that don’t quite match in colour, almost cross-eyed.

“By ‘eck,” she says, and her voice is so deep and loud and such a contrast to the rest of her Nick falls instantly a bit in love.

“Hello, love,” Harry says. He kisses her on the top of the head and scoops Basil up to place him gingerly on the bed. “Look who missed you.”

Basil starts nesting immediately in the covers by her leg and Mrs Whitstable strokes his ears, lip quivering up into something that might become a smile. “He behaving himself?”

“He’s being spoilt rotten,” Nick says. “We had a lovely long walk the other day, all the way up that hill you’re supposed to be able to see Wales from. Then Harry got him a take away.”

“This is my friend Nick,” Harry says, “and that’s Pig. These are from his garden,” he adds, lifting the flowers.

Nick waves and Mrs Whitstable fumbles for her glasses case. Her hands shake but she gets it open and the arms hooked over her ears after a couple of goes. They’re those gold-rimmed things that Nick’s seen for sale in garden centres and service stations and always wondered who bought.

“Oh you’re him off the — thing with him with the Botox,” she says. “I never watch it, personally.
Load of tripe. I have the other on, one with the dancing.”

Harry glances at Nick, brow creased in a question.

Nick shrugs and lets Pig tug him off balance trying to get to the window. She drags him into the bay and he pretends to be fascinated by what she’s looking at with her paws up on the ledge, breath from her nose fogging up the pane. His heart’s going but Mrs Whitstable’s asking Harry about if he’s checked on her house and whether he remembered to bolt the front door and leave through the back because someone named Noel doesn’t have a key to that one. Reflected in the glass, Harry puts his hand on her shoulder and tells her not to worry, everything is fine, and when the guy from the desk comes in with the promised vase, he sets about arranging the flowers and the foliage like he’s forgotten all about it.

“Make a lovely husband, Harry will,” she says.

“Are you proposing to me?” Harry says. “Should I make Nick a buttonhole so he can give you away?”

“If you’re making me anything I’ll have a bridesmaid bouquet and one of those crown things for my head,” Nick says, and as soon as its out of his mouth he wonders if he shouldn’t have said that, but Harry’s sniggering into the leaves he’s tweaking. “Alright place this, isn’t it? Dead fancy.”

It’s not a lie — so long as he ignores the rails on the side of the bed and concentrates on the view and not the coughing in the room next door. He leaves Pig by the window and sits down on the arm chair in the corner. It’s the chintzy kind he’s always fancied but never really had the house for, only with a kind of plastic coating on the fabric. The table next to it has magazines with older people smiling and adverts for personalised funeral plans and short-term life insurance. He pulls a leaflet on dementia out and then shoves it back again, not sure which is the most depressing to leave on top.

“How you doing, then?”

“I’m getting by,” Mrs Whitstable says, pulling herself more upright.

“You met everyone else?” Nick says. “Found anyone to be mates with yet?”

Mrs Whitstable huffs, then winces. “Prefer dogs, always have.”

Harry shoves the last flower into the vase and takes them over to the nightstand, picking up her pills to make room. Nick meets his eye. “Only tolerates you because you look like a spaniel, does she?”

Harry mutters an objection and reads the dosage on the box he’s holding. “I bet these knock you out.”

“Good job they do because the lady over the way does nothing but create all night.”

Harry gives a little nod of consideration, then moves onto the next box before stacking them up in a neat little pile.

“Maybe we can have a nose around later,” Nick says. “See if we can find you a companion looks like a husky. Here, do they have labrador puppies come in to do their training to be Guide Dogs? I’ve heard about that, like some research says people find the puppies soothing when they’re poorly or people who’ve got Alzheimer’s and stuff they sometimes respond, and it’s good for them — the puppies — to get accustomed to different sorts of people, so someone had the idea to bring to two together. I’ll ask on the way out if you want — I’m definitely coming back for that if they do. Bloody love a labrador puppy. How big are their feet?”
Nick makes paws with his hands and Mrs Whitstable looks up from where she’s wrestling what looks like the corner of a prescription form out of Basil’s mouth. “You don’t half talk a lot.”

“Well someone’s got to. What d’you want next, boring question about the food?”

Harry rearranges a sprig of holly entirely unnecessarily. “How is the food?” he says, meeting Nick’s eye.

“Cake’s a bit dry.”

“I’ll bring you some, shall I? I could do you the date and walnut you liked or —”

“Muffins you used to bring weren’t bad.”

Harry smiles. “Muffins it is.”

“Here, take this will you?” Mrs Whitstable says. She shoves the prescription at Nick and he leans in to grab it before Basil can, giving the medical equipment a wide berth in case he unhooks something vital. He flattens out the chewed edge and tucks the sheet between two boxes containing latex gloves and some kind of suppository.

In his hurried retreat he knocks a photo in an old frame that’s nestled with Mrs Whitstable’s hair brush, a mirror, and an old tube of lipstick in a gold case. In it, two women lounge in impeccable evening wear, one of them laughing, the other raising a cocktail at an older guy who looks… familiar. “Who’s this, then?” he says, and picks it up.

“That’s Mrs Whitstable.”

Nick turns the frame over in his hands. On the back, in pencil, it says Me and Florence, 1963. Nick brings it closer to his face. “That’s Cafe Royal isn’t it? When were you gadding about Cafe Royal? I mean it says 1963, but —”

Mrs Whitstable holds out a finger to Basil as he strains to get at the prescription, his little eyes calculating the speed he needs to accelerate to out-maneuvre her.

“Wait, is that that Epstein bloke who did all the sculptures? Like the one in Hyde Park and the one with the angel? What was his name? Jack? Jack Epstein?”

“Jacob,” she says.

“That’s it. And who’s this Florence?” Nick says, peering closer at the table. The drape of the cloth obscures most of Mrs Whitstable’s outfit but her companion’s suit is clearly on show. “How tiny is her waist? That handbag is incredible.”

Harry comes around to look at the picture. “Been on the TV for years, I never really looked at it before.”

“You know where this is, right? Favourite haunt of Mick Jagger and Oscar Wilde and all sorts.”

“Mrs W?”

Mrs Whitstable weighs Harry’s face and then Nick’s before she looks out of the window. “Your mutt is licking the nets,” she says.

Harry nips round the bed to disentangle Pig, but Nick’s journalistic senses are tingling. He glances at Harry and — when Mrs Whitstable leans to over to tell him to tie Pig to the bed frame and offer him
tips on what kind of knot to do — slips his phone out of his pocket like he’s checking the time and thumbs the camera open. He never has been able to resist a tale that sneaks out from behind a photo taken by a hired lens who’ll make everyone look just a tad more polished and good looking than they are.

“What a building, eh,” Nick says, setting the photo back down. “They don’t make them like that anymore.” He pockets his phone and when their attention returns, he fixes his face into a placid mask as if he never moved. “Fore it closed, I went to a party there. I wanted to be fancy, right, so I ordered this cocktail I’d seen David Bowie or Barbara Streisand or someone have in a film — one of those ones makes you feel like in the other hand you should have a cigarette holder, you know?” Mrs Whitstable and Harry are staring at him, Harry curious and Mrs Whitstable slightly knowing. “So this cocktail arrives and I’m chatting up the waiter because my friends are late as per usual, and I take a sip — and I don’t know what I was expecting but it’s just awful. Like mint and fruit, same as when you forget you just brushed your teeth and you have a mouthful of orange juice.” He grimaces theatrically at the memory. “But the waiter — who was really hot by the way — is asking me if it’s to my taste so I’m like suck it up Grimshaw and swallow and try and look like you’re enjoying yourself. And then at that exact moment one of my friends shouts my name and startles me and I start choking. Like coughing but trying to be discreet about it, just really, really trying not to spit cocktail out all over this fancy table and the waiter. But I can’t help it in the end — so I try and catch as much of the drink as I can as it comes out of my mouth, and when I look up — tears streaming down my face and this cocktail all over me — at the next table, Bryan Sewel is interviewing a very famous painter. He gives me this look like I’m something he’s trodden in, turns off the recorder, gets up, taps the painter on the nose with his actual cane and says, ‘Come, David, let’s go somewhere more befitting.’ He actually mentioned me in the article as exemplifying declining social standards. I didn’t go back for four months and only then under protest and sort of wearing a disguise.”

Harry laughs, looks up at Mrs Whitstable for approval from where he’s stroking Pig’s head.

“Little twerp,” she says, a pinched look on her face that makes Nick feel as if he’s just accidentally stepped into a manhole. “Florence dealt with him at Christie’s. Had no time for him.”

She softens and Nick’s shoulders unhunch just a little. “You still see her?” Nick says. “If she’s going to pop in or owt I’m going to feel incredibly underdressed.”

“Social butterflies don’t tend to fly this far north. Not a word in fifty years.”

Her eyes glaze with some remembrance, the kind that’s locked up in a glass case in the farthest dusty corner of a museum, and Harry murmurs this sad little noise and touches her arm.

In the corridor there’s a clink of a trolley laden with cups and saucers, the orderlies asking someone down the hall if they want cake.

“Here,” Nick says, “why don’t I get us all a cup of tea?”

They spend the afternoon with Harry asking about physio and making a list in his phone of everything she halfway hints she needs, while Nick talks about Pig and squirrels and Basil’s appetite for life and the weekly TV guide. He coaxes a couple of stories out of her about parties back in the days when people really knew how to dress for an event, but eventually she tires and the sentences won’t stay put the right way round anymore. Harry kisses her goodbye on the forehead, lingers in the doorway even though she’s already asleep by the time he’s turned to say another farewell.

“They’re taking good care of her,” Nick says and drapes an arm around his shoulder.
“I know,” Harry says, and when they’re halfway down the hall, he wraps his arm around Nick’s middle and holds on really tight.

Outside, Pig tugs on her lead and pulls Nick down the steps. “I’m going to have to take her for a walk round the garden or she’ll destroy the backseat.”

Harry nods, picks Basil up and cradles him against his chest when he can’t make the pace Pig’s set as she bolts for the flowerbed.

Nick reels the lead out to let her go, keeping an eye on her as she sniffs at something tall and yellow. “No eating, you hear.” She looks at him before ducking down to sniff at the grass, tracing a path that’s invisible but very specific, like a portly white bumble bee on a mission. “Love her,” Nick says, jerking his head back towards the home. “When’re we coming back?”

Harry looks up at him, incredulity quirking up his eyebrow. “Really? You want to?”

“Yeah, she’s a right laugh. Why didn’t you tell me she was rich and famous?”

Harry stops. “She’s not, she’s just — Mrs Whitstable.”

“Come off it. She’s in the fanciest nursing home I’ve ever seen anywhere other than period drama and there she was hanging out with the gorgeous and the avant garde at Cafe fucking Royal just before it all kicks off and people start putting LSD in their eyeballs.”

“I don’t think she ever did anything like that. She’s just… normal.”

“What do you think fame is?” Nick says. “It’s just normal people taken out of context and shoved into a photograph and a headline. And what about this Florence? What’s the deal there?” Harry shrugs. “You’re not even curious?”

“A little bit now, I guess?” He squints at Nick in the hazy winter sun. “She never mentioned her, except when she had her fall, when they were putting her in the ambulance, she was all confused and she kept — I don’t know, it was weird. Like she thought I was her or something. Got a bit upset.”

“There we go, then,” Nick says.

“Where we go what?”

“That’s your front page, init?”

“Old Lady Asks For Friend When She Breaks Her Hip? I don’t think that’s really a very newsworthy or very cheerful and festive.”

“No offence Harry,” Nick says, “but you bloody suck at this.”

Harry makes a disheartened noise and Nick moves to accommodate Pig circling around nothing in particular on the grass so she doesn’t get tangled in her lead and strangle herself. “Former socialites and best pals reunited after donkey’s years just in time for Christmas?”

“Ohhhhhhhhh.”

“Bet they do this place up real nice — we can find this Florence, get a photo of them having tea in Mrs W’s room —”
Harry points at Nick, head cocked as he starts to smile. “Yes — them reminiscing over a sherry and wearing tinsel like a feather boa —”

“Bet some people round here even remember them if they were in the paper at the time. Bit of glamour — might even get picked up by other people, that.”

“You reckon?” Harry says. “Might cheer her up as well, be a nice surprise, you think?”

“Exactly. Winners all round.”

“We haven’t even got Florence’s proper name or the picture or anything to go on, though.”

Nick slips his phone out of his pocket. “What d’you take me for,” he says, flipping to the picture he took of the picture, “some sort of amateur?”

It’d be a nice moment of triumph, probably, if Pig didn’t yank his arm almost right out of its socket in pursuit of a bluebottle.
Resting Heartbreak Face

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note that this is one of the chapters that deals with issues mentioned in the tags. If that's something you want to avoid, skip the section at the start in italics x

One thing I never knew about myself is I have resting heartbreak face. Or at least that’s how it seemed sometimes reading the papers. Long lens captured one doorstep snog with someone who had an IMDB profile and suddenly my emotions weren’t my own anymore. A snap of me reading a text from my agent became proof I was feeling like a jealous little weasel, a moment of boredom on a red carpet turned into inner turmoil. My mum rang me in a panic once after catching a glimpse of me ‘stricken and deserted’ on the front page while she was doing her big shop and I had to find a way to tell her it was never anything serious, that we’d been friends for years. Every time he came over with something to promote we’d say we’d have dinner and he’d come over and we’d… not have dinner. We both knew what it was, I was never expecting to show up on his arm at a premiere. Not sure I could even have stood his company long enough to watch one of his movies with him if he still had all his clothes on, if I’m honest, so him wrapping himself around a costar was none of my concern, whatever the bubbles above a picture of my face said.

It blew over, of course it did, hastened by the announcement my judging services would no longer be required and Radio 1 would be one Nick short going forward. My resting heartbreak face got a good run through that press cycle, too.

Couple of weeks after the news broke I was at a wedding disco, the only person there without a date. Even the nana was slow dancing to Rihanna with a guy she was now technically related to, and I just sat there poking the glitter on the table and working my way down a bottle of red. Looking at the pictures now…. Well, it’s funny how it sort of hits you what your life is when you’re alone and everyone else has found love in a hopeless place. I had this moment of looking at myself like a character in a film and found I was someone I’d have wished was edited out. So I drained the wine and went to look for some more and that’s how I ended up in the kitchen thinking things which still scare me surrounded by wipe-clean surfaces and a lot of knives.

I never would’ve really done it, though. Not at the wedding of someone I actually liked. How would that’ve gone? Someone calls them on their wedding night, “’Scuse me love, bad news is you’re not getting your damage deposit back but the good news is you’re not going to need to write a thank you note for that awful plate set.”

When I got back home, Pig looked at me like she could tell what I’d been thinking, all how could you think about leaving me. But she didn’t understand — because she’s a dog — that it wasn’t about leaving her or anyone, really. It was just a lack of anything much to stay for.

Maybe it wasn’t just my face with the heartbreak, after all.
The last dregs of morning rage grey and cold outside the window, leaves scudding past on the lawn as if they’re dancing to the beat of the blinking cursor. Nick thumbs through his notebook for some scrap of a memory which doesn’t make him feel as if he’s splitting his head open like a coconut and pouring the murkiest stuff inside it all over the page, but there’s nothing there that doesn’t bore him. He ends up writing 500 words about how he saw a very expensive holistic healer who took 6 weeks to basically tell him he should get over it, maybe try drinking less coffee and charging his chakra stones under the full moon. He still has the crystals he dotted about the place trying to interior design his despair away somewhere.

The phone rings, startling him into making a noise. He looks around with vague panic before remembering that the phone is where it always is — on the dresser.

“Hello?” he says into the handset, unable to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

“Hey.”

“You gave me a heart attack, what you doing?”

“On my lunch break,” Harry says. In the background a dog’s barking, the happy sort of yip Pig sometimes does when Nick’s left her alone for a bit and then says hello to her. “Thought I’d interrupt your hectic schedule.”

The press of the round plastic against Nick’s head takes him right back to before his dad let him get a mobile and he’d sit on the stairs right at the top and talk to his mates about nothing for hours. In that memory is another: the first time he phoned a boy he fancied. He got the engaged tone and not wanting to lose his nerve kept trying — rang 24 times not knowing they had some fancy phone that logged all incoming numbers, so his mum saw Nick’s attempts to get through while she was chatting to their gran about Coronation Street. To say the subsequent inquisition didn’t go down well with Nick’s object of affection would be an understatement. “How’s it going?”

“Pretty good. We did some surgery this morning on a cat with a cruciate ligament injury, that was pretty cool, and the husky who wasn’t eating is now so he’s going home. I just wondered if you were still coming over tonight?”

In all truth Nick had forgotten he was supposed to be but it’s not like his diary’s rammed with social engagements. Or it is — his agent’s been diligently adding events in London he’s been invited to. Nick watches them appear and hits the little button that says OK and as they rack up and up he feels more and more like it’s not. But Harry’s not a showroom full of billionaires fawning over upcoming artists or a pack of PR types and journalists chasing him for a quote, he’s wellies and old jumpers and being glad a husky’s keeping its brunch down. “Course I am. What time did we say?”

“Didn’t, but mum’s leaving for seven, so whenever really. Bring Pig if you want.”

Nick feeds his finger into the phone’s coil of plastic wire, seeing how far he can get it in. “You cooking? Or should I have my tea first?” He feels fourteen again.

“Snacks might be provided, if you play your cards right.”

“Right,” Nick says, and murmurs a laugh because Harry’s voice went all soft and close. “Pig likes Doritos — but don’t get the spicy ones, they make her mouth go a funny colour and sometimes I forget that’s why and when I wake up in the morning I think she’s dying of some kind of orange
frothing rabies.”

“Noted.”

The line goes quiet but Nick doesn’t mind it; listening to someone you like breathe is severely underrated.

“I’ll see you later then?” Nick says.

“Yep.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

~*~

The pub’s bustling when Nick huffs and puffs his way out of the cold and inside. The fire blazes in one corner surrounded by a family of miniature schnauzers who’ve passed out in a perfect semi-circle and in the other, the local women’s rugby team are tending to each other’s injuries while their leader compiles the round she’s getting on her iPad. Nick waits at the bar for the girl serving to be done with the pints of Guinness she’s pouring, then declares, “I’m here to see Harry,” sounding like a doctor in a 50s movie.

“Go up,” she says. “Know the way?”

Nodding, Nick tugs on Pig’s lead to arrest her attempt to join the schnauzers and lifts the hatch which separates the bar from the rest of the room. He closes it neatly behind him and picks his way down the narrow hallway past boxes of crisps and nuts stacked and waiting to go down to the cellar. At the top of the stairs he raps lightly on the door but there’s no answer, so he pushes in, undoing his scarf. The lights are on in the kitchen and there’s a make-up bag and a mirror on the table, perfume that’s a mix of vanilla and patchouli drifting in from where it’s been recently sprayed. Anne’s on a date — that’s it, isn’t it? He promised Harry he’d come over and take his mind off it. “Anyone home?”

Basil looks up from the sofa where he was idly snoozing on the jumper Nick lent Harry last weekend.

“Anyone else?”

Nick unhooks Pig’s lead from her collar so she can go and say hello, walks over to Harry’s bedroom and peers in through the door. There’s signs of activity — Harry’s wellies left in a pile with another pair of boots and some freshly muddy trainers in front of the wardrobe. The computer is on, its screensaver placidly scrolling through pictures of Harry, his mum, and Gemma mucking about in a nice posh garden somewhere. He watches as Gemma pretends to be a statue of a lady with a vase of
water, then in the next frame cracks up at Harry posing like cupid on the wall around a fountain, both replaced by a photo of Harry and Anne with their arms around each other, squinting into the sun. For want of better things to do Nick takes his coat off and hangs it on the back of the chair, jars the mouse, and the pictures disappear with a fizz of static. In their place on the screen there’s a lot of text. Essay, maybe. Or something for the paper. He’s just leaning down to have a nose when Harry comes through the door with a rustle of carrier bags.

Pig makes straight for him, whipping her tail against his knees as she spins in greeting, and he laughs and pushes his hat back, looking about for Nick. “Sorry — I was —”

“Sorry, I didn’t —”

They both stop with a smile. Harry edges into the kitchen to put the bags down on the counter, shrugging out of them a selection of bottles and a couple of packets of Kettle Chips. “Those look suspiciously like the mixed root vegetable ones that pretend to be healthy,” Nick says.

“They are. You want a beer to offset them?” Harry looks over to where Nick’s trying to lean nonchalantly in the doorway, like his stomach isn’t doing an Olympic gymnastics routine just because it likes the way Harry’s hair falls out of his hat and into his eyes.

“Yes please.”

Harry knocks the cap off two bottles on the edge of the counter, catching the lids as they spin up, and stows the others in a fridge that’s overstuffed with leftovers and bags of green things. He comes over with a shy kind of grin that really suits the rest of his face.

“I hope you’re going to put those crisps in bowls.”

“You think you’re a crisps in bowls guest?” Harry says, and hands him one of the beers, cocking his head. He’s wearing a jumper that looks like it used to belong to a shire horse, shoulders halfway down his arms and the cuffs all bunched up around his wrists where he’s folded them back three times.

“Am I not?”

“I didn’t think so, but —” He tugs his hat off and throws it onto the desk, static-y bits of hair wafting up from his scalp in protest at its desertion. He meets Nick’s eye. “— I can, if it’ll make you feel more wanted.”

Nick swallows and backs up, catching his heel on the edge of the bed. He goes with it and plunks down on the corner, which in retrospect might’ve been an error because now he’s committed them to staying in here, but he doesn’t think he can pull off getting up again so he goes with it, crossing his ankles and trying to look like he doesn’t feel hopelessly on the back foot. He glances at the computer. “You finish your homework?”

Harry rolls his eyes and swings the chair out to sit down. He wedges himself in with one boot up against the leg of the desk so he’s half facing Nick, the light from the screen on one side of his face. “Nope,” he says. “Was going to do some research on Florence but I wasn’t sure how you, like, find a person.”

“Google their name, see if you can locate their Facebook, usually works for me.”

“That’s it? That’s your big journalistic trick of the trade?”

“I said I had some experience, not I’m an award-winning hard-nosed investigator who does Channel
Sighing, Harry calls up Google and types Florence and Facebook into the search bar.

All the results are, naturally, about the one with a machine and the city in Italy. “Oh.”

“It’s Google, Harry, not Mrs Whitstable’s contacts.” Nick swigs from his bottle and settles back, bunching Harry’s duvet up under his fingers. It’s incredibly faded cotton with a pattern of tiny flowers that he at first mistook for being a colour and he pictures Harry all wrapped up in it and then immediately wishes he hadn’t.

“Put Mrs W’s name in as well. Maybe you’ll get lucky and someone from the 21st century will have tagged them both in a throwback Thursday.”

Diligently Harry types the words Joan Whitstable in alongside Florence and hits the magnifying glass. He gets a white page in return and they both stare at it for a moment, waiting for it to disappear and be replaced by actual information.

Nothing happens.

Harry checks the clock on his wall. “Always does this,” he says, with a tut. “I think someone down the road streams Emmerdale.” He pushes away from the desk, toes off his boots, and hops into the lounge before he’s really done shedding them.

A quarter of a screen appears so Nick leans in, skims the results as they drip in in staggered chunks. “This’s her, right? Esteemed stage actress Joan Whitstable nee Bankridge?” He leans closer and clicks on the link, taking him to another white-out that might eventually manifest a picture.

Harry sorts Pig out with a dish of water and feeds her a treat shaped like a bone before clunking bowls around in the kitchen. “She was an actress? Really? Like, a proper actress?”

“Looks like. Christ, this’d be so much easier without broadband out of the Dark Ages. How on earth do you get anything done?”

“I get loads done,” Harry says indignantly as he comes back in, chewing on a beetroot crisp. “Just not stuff requiring the internet.” He offers Nick the crisps, which he has put in an actual bowl — one with a nice pattern and no chips. Nick takes a handful.

“Seriously what do you do in the evening when it’s like this?”

“It’s not that bad. See?” Harry says, plonking himself down as the page loads.

Nick leans in to read. “Look at her hair in that photo.” He points at the screen so Harry can see which one he means. In black and white above her date of birth, Mrs Whitstable’s inimitable nose leads the way in a head shot which showcases an impressively Paul McCartney-esque bowl cut. Harry lifts an eyebrow in appreciation, eyes scanning the text. “So does it mention Florence? Was she an actress too?”

“Dunno,” Harry says.

Nick slides off the bed, unable to stand the frustration of backseat Googling any longer. He reaches past Harry for the mouse and ignores his murmured hey of protest to scroll down to the good bit, skimming for other linked pages to speed things up. “Ooh says here your pal was in a play with Judi Dench.”
“The Judi Dench?”

“How many are there? I’m going to need all the goss on —”

“We can’t ask her about that.”

“Why not?”

Harry leans back with his beer. “It’s — rude? Or something. And if Judi Dench is really horrible I don’t want to know about it. It’ll ruin her for me and I didn’t see her last Bond film yet.”

“That’s been out for literally years, Harry.”

“Yeah well I’ve been busy and it’s not like I had a boyfriend to go to the cinema with.” He glances at Nick and it feels pointed, like it’s Nick’s fault.

Nick focuses on Wikipedia. “No formal training but Joan quickly rose to be respected, thanks not least to her friendship with socialite and patron of the arts Florence Dudley. Binfuckinggo.”

“You found her? Really?”

“Don’t get your hopes up, she could be dead for all we know.” Nick skims the rest of Mrs Whitstable’s page, noting a minor film appearance and a few name checked friends who sound vaguely famous too, in that way that means Nick probably saw a picture of them once in a coffee table book. The personal life section reveals a short-lived marriage to an industrialist and a baby. “Upon the unexpected death of her husband, Joan retired from the stage to play what she called her most exacting role to date — devoted mother. There’s a quote from the Evening Standard and everything. You know anything about this?”

“Not really. I knew she had a husband but she never really mentioned him.”

“And the son? You said when Florence came up before it made him eggy and weird — you think he knows where she is now?”

“Maybe.” Harry rests the rim of his bottle on his lip. “But I don’t want to ask him if we don’t have to. I don’t like him very much.”

“How come?”

“He’s just —” Harry shifts on his seat. “— a twat?”

“Thanks for the in-depth character analysis,” Nick says, sneaking past Harry for a parsnip crisp. “I’ve got a real sense of him now you’ve painted such a vivid picture.”

Harry sags in the chair. “I called him, alright, when she went into hospital? And he just — had a go at me for interfering.” He runs his tongue over his lip and Nick can tell there’s more to it. “And then when they decided she had to go to the home, I asked him what was going to happen with Basil and he said —” Harry glances into the lounge and leans in, whispering, “— I could drown him for all he cared.”

“Oh.”

“So I will call him if I have to — but knowing him, he’d send us on a wild goose chase or ruin the surprise. Can we try another way first?”

Nick’s already Googling Florence Dudley and skim-reading the results to get past gig listings. Half a
page down there’s an article in a local-type paper in Buckinghamshire that catches his eye so he clicks the link, rests back on his heels while he waits. It feels weird to be on a computer in someone’s bedroom, like the part of his brain that’s still a teenager has the urge to keep checking the door for his mum even though they’re not doing anything particularly seditious.

“Oh, here we go — she gave an award at her old school in September. Queen Anne’s was delighted to welcome the noted collector of mid-century works to open the kiln in their new art classroom. In recognition for her generous donation, The Florence Dudley Prize for Arts will now be awarded every year to any pupil displaying above and beyond passion for the arts. That her, you reckon?” Nick gets his phone out and compares the Cafe Royal picture side by side with the one on the screen of a tall, stately-looking woman surrounded by girls in uniform and shaking hands with a smiling art teacher.

“Could be?”

Nick twists the screen for a better angle. “Same eyes.”

Harry leans in. “So we could email the school and see if they’ll put us in touch?”

Nick reaches over him to get to the keyboard and enters a few choice terms, hits return hard. The page surprises him by springing immediately up. He notes the address and opens another page, ignoring the way Harry’s boggling at the readiness to which he has this process to hand while he enters the postcode and Florence’s surname into the provided boxes. He clicks the button to say he won’t use this information for anything other than private, non-nefarious purposes, and hits search. “Or —” Nick nods at where her details are now displayed on the screen underneath what is admittedly some very dodgy-looking graphic design of a target and a house in crosshairs. “— we could just call that number and see if she still lives there.”

“You’re a bit too good at this.”

“This is literally nothing compared to how comprehensively I can stalk an ex on Twitter at four o’clock in the morning.” At Harry’s raised eyebrow Nick ducks out of his eye line on the pretence of grabbing a pen and copying the number. “For friends,” he says, “not for myself. Not since the…. picture of them and their dog and their shiny new husband and the crying vodka tears incident.”

Snorting a derisory laugh, Harry takes the notebook. He focuses on the number like he’s trying to memorise it. “You think I should..?”

“Better do after all this effort.” Nick slides back up onto the bed and retrieves his beer from where he abandoned it on the rug.

Harry digs a phone out of a pile of books and t-shirts on the desk and punches in the numbers. It rings and he squirms in his seat, his face pinching up in anticipation when the ringing stops. “Oh, hello is— wait, it’s an answer phone.”

“Well leave a bloody mess——”

Harry frowns at the beep. “Er — hi, this is Harry and I’m a friend of Joan’s? Joan Whitstable. And —” He pauses, frown deepening. He turns away from Nick and rolls to the window on his chair, poking at the condensation on the glass. “— I know you haven’t really been in contact but I’m sorry to tell you she’s not having the best time at the moment. She had a fall and some pneumonia and — her family, they decided it was for the best if she went to live in a home. I’ve been, it’s — nice and everything but Basil, her dog, he’s had to come and live with me and — I worry she’s a bit — oh. It’s —” He holds the phone out, looking at it quizzically. “I think I ran out of space.”
“Give it here.” Nick takes the phone and hits redial. “Hi Florence it’s Nick, I’m a friend of Harry of
last rambling message fame. If you could give us a call back about Joan that would be amazing.
Have you got a pen? The number is…."

He reels off his mobile number, then hangs up, and Harry shifts on his seat, tugging on his lip. “I
hate those things,” he says.

“Really? Didn’t show.”

“You think she’s going to call tonight?”

“Who wouldn’t, you were charmingly inept.”

Harry snorts, but then the absence of words stretches out between them.

“So.”

It’s not quite like when Harry said it when they were in bed together but not that far off, either.

“You want to get a pizza or something?” Nick says.

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They while away the evening with a large ham and sweetcorn pilfered from the stock downstairs,
Harry stealing Nick’s sweetcorn when he thinks he’s not looking and Nick pretending to be annoyed
about it, when really the faux-stealth face Harry makes as he sneaks a kernel is one of the most
weirdly endearing things he’s ever seen. Nick takes the desk and turns the notes from Wikipedia on
Florence and Joan into a paragraph for the front page while Harry prints out some old photos he
found searching for images of the two of them and flicks on the fairy lights above his bed so he can
spread them out to look at. With laughter drifting up from downstairs now and again it’s both
intimate and not, and Nick sneaks more looks at him than Harry does sweetcorn, watching the way
he tucks his hair behind his quite ridiculous ears and his tongue peeks out when he’s concentrating.

When Nick’s contacts start to irritate him he suggests they give up and relocate to the lounge. Nick
fishes another couple of beers out of the fridge and sits himself against the arm of the sofa, Harry
flicking through his phone to find them something to listen to. He settles on Pink Floyd and it makes
Nick think of books about American college students getting stoned and pretending they don’t fancy
one another as they fuck each other senseless on the floor of a dorm room.

Basil’s still snoozing on the jumper next to the other arm of the sofa but Harry ignores the armchair
and sits down right next to Nick. “Has she called?” he says.

“Not yet.” Nick checks his phone again anyway, depositing it on the coffee table and tucking his
foot underneath his thigh, which brings his knee in very close proximity to Harry’s leg. “You heard
from your mum?”

“Nope.” Harry takes a swig of beer and winces at him. “It’s not a good sign, is it.”

“Course it is, means she’s having a nice time.”

“Exactly.”
Nick ignores the petulant set of his lip. “Who is he anyway, her date?”

“You didn’t ask her about him?”

Harry screws his lips up to one side. “I might’ve, like, looked him up when he commented on her Facebook?”

“And?”

“Didn’t give much away. He runs his own business, got two kids — both grown up — moustache is a bit unfortunate.”

“Could be worse — he could be obsessed with wine memes and minions.” Harry murmurs, not quite in agreement. “What, you think she should hold out for George Clooney or something?” Nick rests his bottle in the crook of his leg, following Harry’s gaze when it traces his fingers around the neck.

“She’s on a date with him. A date.”

“So? She’s allowed. And even if they don’t hit it off romantically maybe she’ll make a new friend. Sounds like they’ve got loads in common — divorced, own business, kids left home —”

“I haven’t left home,” Harry says, wrinkling in an offended frown.

“But you will. You won’t stay here forever, will you — you’ll meet someone or you’ll get a job you need to move for or you’ll want your own space…..”

Harry shifts on the cushions, turning into Nick and resting his elbow on the back of the sofa but curving his spine so bits of him are further away than they were before. “I haven’t so far. I could’ve gone away to college but I didn’t.”

“So you think what, she shouldn’t do anything for herself and her future until you’re ready to push the button on yours?”

Nick meant it as a joke, almost, but Harry digs his nail into the label on his bottle, leaving half-moons in the foil around the top. “No,” he says in a way that sounds more like a yes than a yes would’ve. “I just think he’s not, like, good enough?”

“What if he’s not?” Nick says. “Or what if she just wanted to get dressed up and go out and have a nice meal and a bit of a flirt? People do that. Not everyone’s looking for always every time they leave the house wearing their fancy perfume, Harry.”

Harry bites his lip and looks away. A moment or two passes, filled with nothing but Pig muttering in her sleep over Dave Gilmour. “I love this album,” Harry says.

It’s soft and a mix of petulant and pleading and Nick knows a conversation-ender when he hears one. He can feel it too, the brink of an actual argument somewhere beneath them — and yeah, he has
a lot of thoughts on the subject because he’s got friends like Anne who’ve come over and sloshed wine about as they ranted about kids who wouldn’t let them live their lives. He thinks about saying something like that — don’t be that offspring, you’ll only make yourself miserable and pour resentment all over your relationship — but he’s not sure he really wants to go in to bat for some guy he’s never met who may or not be into minions. “You want me to agree it’s great or start one of those arguments people have in films set in record shops, where things escalate until we’re wrestling over whether or not Stevie Wonder is one of the top thirteen artists of all time?”

“I could go a little wrestle right now,” Harry says, and he keeps his gaze averted but there’s the beginnings of a reluctant smile picking at his cheek. “I won the last one pretty easily, though, so —”

“Don’t start anything I can’t finish?”

Nick swills his beer around and takes a long swig, because if there’s one thing he learnt on the radio it’s that he can lessen the discomfort of most situations just by swallowing the things he has lined up to say and starting on something else. It’s not like he intended to have this conversation and as he contemplates how flagrantly Harry’s disregarded the generally accepted rules of sitting proximity, it dawns on him that maybe all Harry wanted was for Nick to play along with his poor me routine or go in for that kind of gentle ribbing that leads to being handsy.

“Great Gig In the Sky’s the one, init,” Nick says. “If that’s playing when my time finally comes I can’t say I’ll complain.” It gets him an appreciative smile-nod, at least, so Nick gestures to Harry’s phone. “Surprised we’re not plunged back to ye olde world of vinyl, though.”

Harry rests his head on his hand, and it’s only when he visibly relaxes Nick realises how tense he made Harry by disagreeing with him. “Thought I might get one with my Christmas bonus actually, a record player.”

“Course you did,” Nick says, ducking down so Harry can see he’s teasing. “Why get a real modem and Spotify when you can pretend it’s 1970? Least you’ve got the hair for it.”

Harry rolls his eyes softly and blows across the top of his bottle to make a sound that’s almost but not quite discordant with the track. “What exactly do you do on your fancy London internet you think is so great, anyway?”

“I —” Nick stalls, trying not to say that some nights he used to get very excited about the fact he could simultaneously listen to Annie, scroll through whatever show his next guest was in without the sound on, and do his Ocado. “— post Snapchat videos of Pig?”

Harry looks pointedly at where Pig’s asleep with her face almost in Basil’s food bowl. “Fascinating.”

“Seriously,” Nick says, giving his shoulder a glancing tap, “do you not find it puts a crimp on things?”

“How would it?”

“Do you never want to chat up someone you fancy on Twitter or —”

“You do that?” Harry looks up.

Nick grimaces. “It’s less obnoxious than Grindr?”

“Right.” Harry’s gaze falls and for a second Nick thinks he’s annoyed or maybe even jealous, but it’s not that, more like he’s lost in thought in a way that necessitates staring at his chest. “I guess that could have its advantages, if I was, like, interested in someone and we never crossed paths. But if it
was someone I knew in real life —” Harry tucks his hair back behind his ear and when he looks up
again, there’s something cautious yet challenging about it. “— I think I’d want to get to know them
outside of messages? Because if that’s where they exist to you, it’s sort of all in your own head?”

Nick shifts, focusing on the pool of cold denim from where his beer’s been resting, as if it might
somehow help dissipate the feeling Harry’s flicking through his memories and seeing all the times he
flirted with someone on social media, then backed out of meeting, panicking about ruining his
daydreams or something even less admirable than that. “Don’t underestimate a fantasy.”

Very deliberately Harry nudges Nick’s knee with the pad of his finger. “Since when do you need
amazing broadband to have one of those?”

“I don’t know,” Nick says, and he doesn’t, because his mind has emptied and all that remains is this
feeling that they’re playing a game, now, advantage pinging back and forth. He swallows, shoots a
glance at Harry’s computer. “Helps, though, like how do you watch porn on that thing without dying
of frustration?”

A slow smirk spreads up Harry’s face and he lifts his beer to his lips, downing a mouthful before he
says, “We’ve got excellent wi-fi in the toilets downstairs.”

“That’s — handy? Lacks romance, b—”

“Wait.” Harry drops his beer dramatically from his mouth and clasps the sleeve of Nick’s jumper in
delighted, mocking surprise. “You want romance when you’re watching porn?”

Nick doesn’t know the rules of whatever game this is but apparently he’s gone from holding a draw
to definitely losing. “I —” Nick needs to fire something back. Unfortunately, all he can think to say
is, “— in the toilets? Really?”

“It’s quite hospitable. Can go down there and see, if you like?” Harry says, low and close. His
fingers slack off on Nick’s arm but he doesn’t draw away. “Don’t want you to lie awake all night
worrying about my buffering.”

“You want to go and watch porn together in the toilets?”

“If you do.” Harry stares back at him, unblinking and quite possibly unjoking.

The terrible thought occurs to Nick that maybe he’s not. And Nick’s curious almost to the point of
tempted — he can see it, them huddled over Harry’s phone, both of them hyped up on awkward
small talk and the camera lingering on the corner of a guy’s mouth as a dick slips out of it.

“What if someone came in?”

Harry shrugs; Nick pictures Harry’s fingers pressing his lips and telling him to shush at the turn of a
door handle, mind spiraling through dragging Harry into a stall, pressing him back against the wall
and burying his nerves at the same time as his teeth in the side of Harry’s neck.

Maybe all of this would be easier with a backdrop of people none the wiser on the other side of the
wall and the drunken graffiti. It’d be familiar if nothing else: when he lived in a small town, he’d trek
to Manchester under cover of lies to his parents, sneak into bars with a fake birthdate and skim every
face for someone who looked friendly and up for it, someone he could trust with his inexperience.
He wonders if Harry’s ever done that, then if Harry’s ever done anything but that or if that’s why
he’s suggesting it.

“What’d we watch, then?” Nick says, words somewhere down in the bottom of his throat.
“Don’t really mind. Although —” Harry pauses and a frond of hair springs out from behind his ear to hang in front of his eyes. “— I prefer, like, guys on their own sometimes? Like — I don’t know. You don’t really want to know.”

“I do.”

Harry wets his lip and out of the corner of his eye, Nick catches his leg twitching. “Sometimes —” His jumper shifts across his skin, make all the hairs there stand up. It’s Harry’s fingers, tightening on the wool, tugging the stripes all out of shape. He hadn’t realised Harry’s hand was still there. He takes a quick catalogue of the rest of him, just to check, and it’s all much closer than Nick thought, the curve of his mouth as he wavers between jokey and serious, the rumple between his perfect eyebrows as he debates his next word. Now he’s focusing on it, Harry’s breath is very loud and very fast, too. “ — well, I, like, pretend they sent the videos to me because we’re together, but apart? Makes it feel… less creepy, and I watch the same guy a few times, so he starts to feel like — I don’t know.”

“Like a long-distance porn boyfriend?” Harry closes his eyes in a slow, affirmative blink, and Nick should think it’s hilarious that he watches some guy getting it on with his own fingers and a handful of lube and pretends it’s a relationship but his throat is busy closing up around his pulse.

“It’s just something I do sometimes. We wouldn’t have to do that, obviously.”

“Too early to ask your porn boyfriend for a threesome?”

Harry gives off a jittery laugh, scrunching up the wool of Nick’s sleeve and some of Nick’s actual arm as well.

Gently, Nick unhooks Harry’s fingers. To keep them from finding something else to latch onto he slots his own between them, skin tingling at the slide until they’re knuckle to knuckle. It’s a bit awkward, like they’ve suddenly got too many thumbs, but he keeps going until the Vs between his fit snug into Harry’s, mounds of their palms together. Harry’s skin is tanned where his is merely freckled and as his fingers close over the back of Nick’s hand, they feel like they understand their purpose far better than Nick’s ever have, strong and possessive in the way they hold on.

“You’ll have to work up to it.” Nick rubs his thumb over Harry’s, trying to be soothing, maybe, flicking his gaze from their hands to Harry’s face, unable to linger too long on either. “Maybe he’ll be into the idea, if you ask.”

“Nick,” Harry says, and it comes out like more of a shaky whine than a word. He tugs Nick’s hand towards him and Nick’s chest feels like it’s caving in.

A bit of Nick wants to laugh and get up — shatter this all to hell before it actually becomes something — in fact, all it’d really take would be to look away or say Harry’s name with a note of caution and regret, but he stays where he is, convinced that if he moves, he’ll fracture the entirety of this reality to the point of irrevocable ill repair. He holds his breath; Harry doesn’t, and he’s definitely leaning in, so close he’s stuttering warm air across Nick’s lips before he brushes an open mouth against them. Nick responds automatically — maybe too automatically because Harry lingers for only a moment before he retreats.

“Was that all right?” Harry’s eyebrows bunch up in concern.

“Yeah,” Nick says, and it sounds like a question so he says it again more emphatically. “Yeah, yeah, ‘course.”
Harry looks unconvinced, so Nick lets go of Harry’s hand and touches his chin, skimming it with his thumb. It gets him a smile but that’s not all Nick wants, so he shifts for a better angle, properly meets his mouth this time. At the first flicker of tongues against each other Harry makes a strangled sigh somewhere in his throat and it sort of staggers Nick how inevitable it feels, then, to be kissing him. The second he met him, didn’t he know this was going to happen and exactly like this? He should’ve recognised the moment when he landed in the middle of it and brought them straight to here, to his fingers slipping into Harry’s hair and Harry steadying himself on Nick’s chest.

Everything becomes clear, like he’s finally achieved something akin to the mindfulness his holistic healer talked about, only instead of imagining he’s connected to the earth, it’s Harry he feels rooted to.

Pig barks.

They snap apart, Harry’s gaze darting over Nick’s hair. His eyes widen and Nick whips his head round just in time to see Pig nose-butt Anne in the thigh. She’s caught in the doorway partway through gesturing for Pig to be quiet and edging out again. “Sorry, sorry,” she whispers, like she still might be able to manage a swift, discreet exit.

“Urrrr, hi?” Harry scrambles to his feet all lopsided, like one half of him has fallen entirely to sleep.

Nick follows him up, babbling a near incoherent chastisement to Pig, blurring out a, “Oh you look nice — how was your date?” as he hooks Pig away by her collar and tries to shove her behind his knees as a barricade. Bent almost double he meets Anne’s eye, pressing his lips together and wondering if he should maybe wipe his mouth or if that’ll just draw attention to the fact her son recently had his tongue in it.

“It was — ” Anne’s voice is more of a compressed chirrup than a voice, her face a bit like the blushing emoji. “— very pleasant, thanks. And here? This — went — well?”

Floundering, Nick says the first thing he can think of. “There’s some crisps left but Harry got those vegetable ones and honestly I think they’re an insult to the concept of crisps. What’s wrong with a salt and vinegar Disco or some Pringles? If you wanted to be healthy you’d be having a kale smoothie wouldn’t you? Might as well just go for it — have a proper crisp, save your regrets for a rainy day. The beetroot ones are all right, though, aren’t they?” He pauses. He has no idea what he’s saying. “Shall I put the kettle on?”

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They walk at a pace a slug would find excessively ponderous, elbows knocking against each other. Nick has never drunk an instant cocoa as fast as he just did in his entire life — his oesophagus may in fact never forgive him — and he can’t seem to shake the image of himself opening cupboards in some preposterous act of being unbothered. He looked in the hoover one four times despite the fact that no one in the history of putting the shopping away has ever put their HobNobs in the airing cupboard.

“Shall I —” Harry says slowly, lingering mockery prompting a cautious smile even before he’s finished. “— put the kettle on?”
“Shut up,” Nick says, and stares straight ahead at the trees.

“Love a custard cream, don’t you?” Harry says, in a terrible impression of Nick’s accent. He shoves Harry and Harry veers off, laughing, Basil trotting after him as he almost topples off the kerb.

Nick catches him with a handful of shoulder and hauls him back. “You could’ve stepped in to save me from myself at any time.”

“Where’d be the fun in that, though.” Harry staggers into his side and Nick loops an arm around his shoulders, pulling him in and muttering a snigger into his hair.

They turn the corner, which brings them right back to where they started, to the fresh memory of Nick saying he should make a move, and Harry’s see-through excuse about multi-tasking seeing him out and taking Basil for a wee. Inside the pub, the lights are warm and there’s a handful of people clustered around the fireplace, the bell ringing for last orders. Nick thinks maybe a pint might take his mortification down a notch but Harry makes no move to go in, just slips out from under Nick’s arm to face him. When he looks up at Nick, he’s all sparkly in the eyes. “Anyway,” he says.

The place where Nick’s reply should go stretches on and on and on. And Nick knows this should be easy — but he can’t think what to do, so he just balls Pig’s lead up in his hand and eventually Harry adds, “Let me know if Florence calls?”

“Sure.”

“And thanks for finding her and everything.”

Nick scrubs at the pavement with his toe. “No problem. What are friends for and all that.”

Harry looks, unavoidably, straight at him. “That’s what we still are, is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

The way Harry’s looking at him makes him feel like the entire world is staring at him, and not in the way he enjoys. “I’d like to be just a little bit more than that, if I’m honest,” Harry says, dead quiet.

In a flurry Nick sees a chunk of his autobiography appear like someone else is typing it — words about how his definition of the word ‘friend’ has always been elastic, how he applies it to everyone from someone he’s met once to someone who occupies the other side of his bed for two months. At some point he started just applying it to anyone he vaguely liked to keep everyone contained, because nothing could get too out of hand if ‘friend’ was the word he used for a guy he wanted and the window cleaner.

“You do —” Harry glances down at his ridiculously oversized jumper. “— like, like —”

What a terrible non-question.

Nick hooks his fingers into Harry’s jumper, gives it a little jiggle. “What you doing Friday night? Why don’t you come for dinner? I’ll make something nice.”

Harry’s whole face lifts. “You’re going to cook for me?”

“Candles and everything — if I can find any in the loft. If not, I’ll just — hold my fag lighter in the middle of the table while you eat. That do you?” Nick says.

Harry nods.
“Mums interrupting, not on the menu.”

Harry snorts a laugh, too late tries to hide the noise in his own shoulder. Obviously he doesn’t know yet that those bursts of mirth make Nick’s feet scrunch up.

Nick takes his chin between his thumb and forefinger, lifts it so Harry looks up at him. And he definitely looks like he wants another kiss so Nick kisses him, keeps it soft for a lot of reasons, including that his mum could very well be watching.

“So — I’ll text you when I get in so you know I haven’t been attacked by owls on the way home and you call me tomorrow on your lunch break?”

Harry grins against his mouth, bumping them together in approximation of another kiss.

“‘Night then, Nick,” he says.

It wasn’t even a proper snog but Nick’s heart is pounding.
Save the date

Back in the days when I used to have a standing Sunday date with Annie Mac, she’d help me dissect my others. There was the guy who told me as a cold opener I definitely had a face for radio, another who told me he hated me on T4 but still expected a blowjob because I took him all the way out to zone 5. There was another who kept calling me Grin-shaw and someone who spent the entire time trying to sell me a new conservatory — which is the only time in my entire life I’ve genuinely eyed the window in the pub bogs and wondered if I might fit through it if I went head-first. Made it more bearable sometimes to know that in a couple of hours Annie would be telling me, “Grim, that is aggressively hopeless,” and handing me a glass of wine.

Annie would say to me, “How did you even meet this person?”

And I’d never really know. They were never people I’d sought out, and sometimes now I wonder if that was the point, if I only ever went out with people I knew wouldn’t work out, so I never had to work out how to go out with people.

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Nick never really considered shopping to be a high-risk activity before it involved battling a sat nav with a grudge against him, tackling a steep hill with no safety features whatsoever, and dealing with tractor drivers who apparently get a peculiar thrill paying chicken on narrow roads with people in regular vehicles.

With his hands shaking he pulls off the main road and onto the track that’ll take him to Rook Farm, glancing at himself in the mirror to see if he looks as emotionally rattled as he feels. He pulls up in the carpark and the smell of cowshed hits him almost immediately. He fumbles for the scrap of paper on which he scrawled the ingredients he needs and wafts it under his nose as he gets out, wondering if there’s somewhere he could pick up whatever it was ye olde Elizabethan ladies used to wrap in a hanky to ward off the foul scent of their suitors like he’s seen in films.

Mercifully inside the actual shop it’s less pungent — they must have Air Wick’s going in every available socket — and Nick goes over to the chiller. Five different kinds of milk and cream vie for his attention, cartoon cows in various stages of rude health on the front of each kind trying to entice him to choose their particular percentage of fattiness.

“All right there, are you, Nicholas?”

Nick starts; he thought he was alone with the cows on the cartons but Niall’s sitting behind the till, his broken foot propped up on a stool with a floral-pattern pillow underneath it and a laptop.

“Oh hiya.” Swinging the door of the chiller closed, Nick dodges around a display of clotted something, picking up a carton and mugging at the calorific content. “How’s your foot?”

“A bloody nuisance,” Niall says. He adjusts his hat. “Hate being stuck in here, day like today.”

Nick eyes the vista where what can only be described as mizzle is swirling and decides that maybe for someone with Niall’s constitution this is as desirable a weather front as most people find an unexpected mild spell in spring. “How are all the cows?” Nick says.
“Grand.”

“And Mabel? She’s… all right?”

“Pretty as a picture. Y’after something in particular?” Niall says as Nick puts what he was debating back on the shelf.

“I got a friend coming for dinner — found this recipe for fish pie I want to make but it doesn’t say which kind of milk to get.”

“Ah,” Niall says, with a smile that’s just a bit too knowing. He lifts his crutch and points at the middle of the shelf. “Get the green. Nice midpoint in the range, good for sauces, not too heavy. You’ll be wanting a butter as well for your potatoes — get the regular and add a little sprinkle of nutmeg right at the end. And the eggs there — they’re completely free range — those hens up in the top field, they’ve practically got a Centre Parks. Best in the county, those.”

Feeling like he should be making notes, Nick tucks two pints of milk under his arm, grabs a carton of eggs in medium and a chilled gold-wrapped pat of butter with a picture of grass and hooves on the front. “You don’t just want to come over and be my personal chef, do you?” he says.

“Go out on a limb and say you can’t afford me.” Niall grins and beckons for Nick to bring his selections over.

Nick sets them on the counter and toys with a bag of dairy fudge. Should he do some sort of dessert? He runs through all the times people have cooked for him in a romantic scenario. The best he’s ever been offered was one of those fruit salads you buy in a train station; his date got it two for one on his way home from work. If he’d thought ahead he’d have texted Harry to bring something from the bakery but it’ll be too late now. “You got pudding-y stuff?” he says.

“Sure.” Niall slides off his stool and hobbles over to the freezer, using the edge of it to lean on. He’s not wearing any shoes — just one sock with a pattern of aggressively smiling polka dots in every colour of the rainbow that his greying jeans are half tucked into. “Now, we got your home-style cheesecakes — nice range of flavours, maybe a little heavy after the pie — we got your frozen yogurts including some of your edgier flavours —”

“Edgier?”

“Well —” Niall screws up his face. “— we had a little drink one night and come up with this mojito flavour but honestly I don’t think it’s a winner. Your pina colada though I think is a goer.”

Nick peers into the top of the freezer. It’s more packed than he expected — next to the yoghurt there’s ice cream churned on site. He pulls out a frozen low fat Greek-style that looks like what Harry got the last time they were here and holds it up. “You any idea where I can get strawberries or something to go with this?”

“Be lucky this time of year. And —” Niall takes the tub. “— Harry claims this is his favourite —” Apparently it’s obvious who the friend is. Blushing slightly, Nick bites through the urge to ask what Harry’s said about him because he’s not actually 14 years old. He’s making fish pie and everything like a proper adult, he can’t ruin all that maturity asking for gossip about himself. “— because he likes to think he’s all healthy and shit, but if you really want to get in his good books —” Niall fishes in the freezer and waves a tub at Nick. On the front, it says ready to be a-salted by nuts and caramel? “— this is the one that’ll do it. Give him that and a spoon and he’ll love you forever.”

Nick takes it and meets Niall’s eye. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that level of commitment. You got
something more in the will think fondly of you until next Tuesday line?”

Niall laughs and hobbles the tub over to the till to ring it up. He beeps Nick’s purchases through one at a time, stowing them all in a nice brown paper bag with a cow’s face on the front while Nick gets his wallet out. “Where you going for your fish?”

“Asda?”

“You want to go to Sam Young’s — tell him I sent you — I’ll get y’a map up.” Niall scrubs his fingers over the laptop’s mousepad and it springs to life on a video frozen part way through. There’s a familiar mop of hair on the screen.

“Is that Harry?”

“It is that.” With a shrug Niall starts the video. “Since I’m stuck in here was editing him a little best of the year for his Christmas present.”

It opens with a cow and Harry in the snow, the cow rolling a hay thingwhatsit with its head and Harry laughing hard, practically back bending with the effort to contain it, then dodging out of the way of a well-aimed snowball. It cuts to him with a birthday cake, his smile lit up by candles in a dark room full of grainy singing faces, then it’s spring and there are baby cows in the pen he’s trying to wade through, grinning at their eagerness to mistake his pockets for udders. “Are you filming me?” he says, then a plaintive, “Niiiiiaaaalllllllllll,” as he waves the camera down. In another, he doesn’t mind it — he’s doing a piece to camera in a giant yellow raincoat about the importance of keeping feed dry but he cracks up halfway through at his own rain pun and dissolves into giggles before shaking his hair out and starting again, his head tilted in an attempt to be serious. The same day he apparently broke into a full song and dance number to Singing In The Rain and Nick laughs at him trying to do the bit with swinging around a lamppost only with a steel strut in the cowshed.

The rain on the screen disappears and Harry’s lying in a field in the sunshine, making a grass angel with his arms and wellied legs. In the next bit, he and Niall are both sunburnt and the camera must be on the fence because they’re moving through the herd and ducking down, trying to see if they’re in shot, shoving each other and cackling as they stagger. Harry falls over with a very late, “Ow,” and then they’re at the beach with a few kids under five who have Niall-like features but clamour for Harry’s attention. Autumn brings Basil and a quiet night at the pub and then Niall’s in a hospital wheelchair and Harry’s voice is behind the camera, joking about this being what happens when you get drunk and now he’s one leg less.

Nick feels a bit like a lottery winner in an advert who’s tossing tenners in the air and watching them rain down, only instead of money he’s standing in the middle of something much more precious, these little floating fragments of Harry’s life. All of a sudden, his reflection on the screen looks like the ghost he’ll be when he’s finished his book and fucked off back to London like he was never really here.

“It’s not quite finished,” Niall says, turning the laptop back towards him, “but I got plenty of time to work on this and the new Mabel video we did — hey you want to see that as well?”

Nick nods, watches Niall and Harry on the screen talk through all the issues facing cows in the winter. Harry’s very serious as he delivers his lines and Niall nods sagely from underneath a grey felt hat, but right at the end, just as Harry’s finishing his speech, he turns and gives Niall a peck on the cheek.

The picture fuzzes out and slowly, Nick becomes aware that Niall’s waiting for him to say something. “Harry’s right about Mabel, star personality — camera loves her doesn’t it?” Nick says.
“Always has. Him too. You should see the comments he gets.”

Nick murmurs, drums on the edge of the counter. “I bet.”

“Keep telling him, if he wanted, he could make a living on YouTube doing vet videos — someone rang t’other day asking if he’d be interested in endorsing a worming treatment.”

“This where you tell me you’re both running off into the sunset on the proceeds?”

“I wish.” Niall checks the clock. “Anyway you best be off. Sam’s not one for the late finish, don’t want you to miss out.” He calls up a new window on the screen and loads a map, traces the route with his finger, giving Nick landmarks to look out for at each crucial decision point. “…and then you’re there. Can’t miss it. Like I was saying — tell him I sent you, he’ll sort you out.”

“Thanks,” Nick says, “you’ve been a real godsend.”

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By the time Nick staggers through the door with his bags, he’s only got an hour before Harry arrives and the inside of his head is buzzing like a radio that can’t find any channels. He drops the whole lot on the counter in the kitchen and pushes up his sleeves.

“Right then,” he says, ostensibly to Pig but mostly to himself. He stares at the bags and clocks the ice cream. “You need to go in the freezer.” He manoeuvres some ice about, unsure if there’s anything that constitutes food actually in there until he jolts the permafrost off the tub of frozen yoghurt Harry made him buy that he forgot about. He wedges the ice cream in next to it, forcing the door shut on it. “Fisherman’s Pie.”

On the website, the recipe has two spoons for ease of cooking but now Nick’s looking at it, that seems as if it may be one spoon too many for him to handle. He skims the instructions and the ingredients — potatoes, fish, sauce — humming to himself. He really wants to have a shower before Harry gets here so he decides to just throw himself into it. He grabs the potatoes and attacks them with a peeler, them sliding like slippery bastards between his fingers. He has to retrieve a couple from the floor and various corners of the work top but he rinses them off, chops them into pieces of various sizes, and drops them into a pan of water.

“Mashed potatoes. We can do this. Ok where’s the —” He ducks down, eye level with the knobs on the front of the stove. He turns one, checking the ring on the top but there’s no fire, just an ominous hissing sound. Fanning the gas away he tries again, and at the push of his fingers there’s a click. “Oh yeah. That’s it.”

He turns the knob, pressing it in at the same time, and the gas ring whooshes into life. Nick allows himself a deep breath of self-congratulation and goes back to recipe, skimming the instructions.

“Poach the fish — pan — milk — onion studded with cloves.”

Arsé. Did he get any cloves?

Upending the bags on the kitchen counter Nick realises: no. He flings open the nearest cupboard and roots through it for anything resembling spices. There’s some bay leaves that look practically fossilised. He tosses them aside but behind them it’s just more bay leaves that are, if anything, in a
worse state. There’s an ancient mustard jar full of chilli flakes but nothing else so Nick decides bay leaves will probably do. Studding an onion with them, though?

While he muses on it he unhooks a frying pan from where it hangs on the side of the cupboard. It’s approximately 90 times heavier than he thought it was going to be and his wrist snaps down so fast with the weight of it he thinks he might’ve broken it. Heaving the pan onto the stove with both hands and a clang makes some of the water from the potatoes slop over the side and put the flame out.

“Oh fucking hell.”

Cradling his aching wrist to his chest, he holds down the knob for the ring in to light it again but nothing happens, presumably because it’s all damp now, so he drags the pan to another burner and lights that one instead. It’s one of the small pointless ones and its flame tickles a spot in the middle of the pan like are you serious?

Still, at least the elongated boiling time will give him ample opportunity to figure out how to wrap bay leaves around an onion. Remembering Harry’s tip from the chutney incident, Nick peels the onion and runs it under the tap before it has a chance to get him in the eyes with its evil juices. He grabs a bay leaf and experimentally holds it against the curve of the onion. Has he got any string? Could he staple it? One end of the crispy leaf sticks — so he tries to smooth it around to a nice fit. It snaps in half. Nick tries again with another one — same result. Impatience creeping in, Nick crumbles the entire contents of the jar and rolls the onion in the bay bits. They pepper the outside and stick heavily to the cut ends.

“Perfect.”

Pig looks over from where she’s sitting in the window. It seems like she disagrees with his assessment but Nick didn’t get this far in life by listening to the quiet judgement of his dog’s eyebrows.

Where was he? Fish. Poaching. Right. He shakes the fish out of its paper and into the pan. Sam Young — a mountain of a man Nick would never have dared speak to without the magic Niall word for protection — chopped it for him when Nick said how slimy it is makes him gag so at least he doesn’t have to actually touch it while it’s still raw. Next the recipe calls for 500ml of milk. He looks about the kitchen. If there is a measuring jug Nick has no idea where it is, so he glances at the amount on the carton and guesses. He stares at the milk while it bubbles, not wanting to be caught out by it boiling over and putting the flame out. He pokes at the fish periodically with a wooden spoon in order to feel like he’s contributing until its requisite number of minutes are up.

He fishes the pieces out with a fork and arranges them into a blue china baking dish that has several chips around the rim. Wiping his forehead, he reads the next instruction with his lips pressed together. Apparently he’s still on step one.

Next, add the boiled eggs —

Eggs, then. They need the same amount of time as the fish. If he’d known that he could’ve done them both together while he was needlessly poking at the haddock. Sighing, he gets another pan of water boiling, lowers a couple of eggs in, careful not to do it too hastily and crack them on the bottom. He sets the timer on his phone and paces the kitchen while they bob away because peering into the pan is doing nothing but steaming up his glasses.

When they’re done he peels them, swearing vigorously at how hot the shell is as it flaps back against his fingers. Slicing them neatly as suggested doesn’t go as well as it might owing to the bluntness of all the knives and the fact they’re too warm to hold still, so he settles for smashing them into pieces
and dropping them on top of the fish.

That’s when he realises the onion that he was supposed to add to the milk during poaching is still sitting on the chopping board, surrounded by shredded bay. “Oh bollocks.” He drops it into the liquid. All the bay bits float off and disperse.

Nick ignores it and tells his heart to stop going like the Countdown clock when it gets all anxious at the end of the allotted time. He’s finished step two and there’s only four, he can make this.

“Step three. Make a white sauce using the poaching milk.” Nick pokes at his phone with a finger, leaving a smudge on the screen. No more instructions appear — the next one’s all about pie assembly. “What d’you mean, make a white sauce? If I knew how to make a white sauce I wouldn’t need a bloody recipe would —”

Huffing, Nick turns everything down a notch and goes outside, searching for white sauce recipes and waving his phone around the zone he usually has the most success in. The results load and Nick skims the first offering from Good Food.

“Flour — butter — milk, right, got it.”

By the look on Pig’s face she doesn’t think he has, but he proves her wrong by cleaving a chunk of butter from the packet and dropping it into the pan with the milk in. He waits until she’s distracted by a bird in the garden before fishing out the bit of foil wrapper he accidentally included and digs under the carriers for the flour, pulls the top of the bag apart, whereupon a cloud of the stuff makes for his face.

He’s just coughing it off when the doorbell rings. In a panic, he empties an indeterminate amount of flour into the pan and tosses out a would-be cheery, “S’open, come in.”

Wait. Was he supposed to just whack the flour in the milk?

He’s not sure, now, but Harry’s through the door so Nick stirs like he’s Nigella. “Hi Harry.”

“Hey piggy pig Pig.” Harry crouches down to tickle her ribs, her tail wagging like crazy for him. “Hey you,” he says as he comes over.

Nick turns to greet him but the milk on the stove top splutters so Nick pushes his glasses up and peers into the pan. He has no idea what it’s supposed to look like but he suspects it isn’t that. The green bits are circulating like some kind of synchronised swimming team and globs of flour bob around them like whales.

“Smells… good,” Harry says. “Can I do anything?”

“No, I’m fine.” Nick catches one of the globs with his spoon and pushes it down to the bottom, trying to get it to dissolve. Another one pokes its head up. It’s pretty much the same size as the iceberg that sank the Titanic. He subtly moves in front of it to shield it from Harry’s view. “How was work? You have a good day?”

“Did the festive window display. What we having?”

“Fish pie.”

Harry peers around him to glance at the sauce. He doesn’t say anything but Nick sees concern creep across his eyebrows.
“Yeah, it’s —” Nick searches for the word. “Is Good Food a real website?”

“Do you want me to —”

“No, it’s fine, you’re the guest so just —” Nick waves at him with a spoon which has two blobs of flour stuck to it. “— make yourself at home or something?”

Nick turns his back on Harry and checks the potatoes, trying to multitask wiping his forehead on his sleeve and looking as if he cooks suave dinner parties all the time and this will all come together beautifully at the last minute, like he’s someone on Bake Off wrenching cupcake success from the jaws of disaster. Upon inspection, though, the potatoes are not so much potatoes as a mush that used to be potatoes under a skin of foamy grey water. Great. He can’t even make mashed fucking potatoes, he smells like fear and possibly cow shit, and there’s probably self-raising in his hair. If he’s really fucking lucky it’ll look like dry shampoo and that’s just perfect, because it’s not like he really, really wanted tonight to go alright because Harry’s the most promising person he’s met in absolutely bloody ages or anything. He clings to the front of the oven to try and get his breath back.

Harry touches his arm. “Hey — you all right?”

“Yep.”

Nick’s not. Everything feels like it’s sinking.

Harry’s face fogs, the kitchen behind him fading out like it’s been blurred on TV for being rude. “You’ve gone a funny colour.” Harry removes the spoon Nick’s clasping and backs him away from the stove. “Let’s just —”

Everything’s gone weird but Nick doesn’t want to alarm him since this is supposed to be a date-type thing, so he adopts a prim newsreader voice and announces, “I think I might need a spot of fresh air.”

Harry flicks the knobs on the stove to off. “Yeah, yeah — ok.” He steers Nick through the door and down the step and out into the garden, fingers digging into the inside of Nick’s elbow.

He likes that it’s too hard, gives him something to focus on.

“You feel faint? You need to sit down?” Harry’s looking around for a chair but there isn’t one, just a bench right at the bottom of the garden before the fields start that Nick has spent many a morning staring at, thinking he should go out there with a coffee and watch the mist like a poet.

“No — I’m — I’m good. Ish.”

“No — I’m — I’m good. Ish.”

“Ok, just breathe.”

A bit of Nick wants to laugh because that’s sort of automatic isn’t it, but Harry’s doing the serious face he did in the vet’s and Nick’s not sure he is breathing, actually.

He takes a lungful of air, imagining it filling him up like he’s balloons.

He does it a few times and some of the weirdness floats off like he’s an onion and it’s bay crumbs.

At least nothing has gone purple this time.

“Here, have my coat?” Harry’s already shrugging out of it; he’s fixated on Nick’s shaking hands.

“No, it’s not — I’m not cold. Bit warm, actually.” He pushes the sleeves of his jumper up past his elbows and the rush of frigid air prickles along his skin, relief with it.
Somewhere underneath he registers Harry’s chivalrous. He’s never really had that before, never had someone who’d walk home in a t-shirt while Nick stayed cocooned inside his jacket. He never thought it was something he wanted, but now that it’s there, it’s quite nice, in a way that makes him feel slightly embarrassed.

Harry reaches up, brushes his hair back, and rests his knuckles on Nick’s forehead. “What next, you going to come for my bum with a thermometer?”

Harry reaches for Nick’s wrist and turns it over. “Oh god I can’t look,” Nick says.

Harry’s fingers drift over the inside of his wrist and Nick shrivels up. “I’m only checking your pulse.”

“I know and it’s all boney and veiny and it creeps me out if I think too much about it.” He stares at the end of the garden, at the hills, at anything so he doesn’t think about Harry literally pressing on his blood and counting it.

Harry gives it a few more seconds. “It’s a bit fast. Nothing too lethal, hopefully.” He offers Nick a small, crooked smile, assesses Nick’s face. “How’d you feel?”

“Silly.”

“Don’t, it’s fine.” He looks towards the fence. “Sit for a bit?” At Nick’s nod, Harry hooks his arm under Nick’s elbow and great, now Nick knows what it must feel like to be a nana helped across the road by a nice young gentleman.

Nick plants his arse on one of the lower greyed-out beams, hooking his fingers over the wood and letting it dig in until he can imagine the rivulets of the old wood grain embedded in his skin. If he was seeing Annie later he’d already be plotting this in his head — and I get overcome with onions and recipe stress and practically faint in the kitchen. So he has to rescue me. And if you ever wanted to know why all I’ve got in my fridge normally is Diet Snapple and ready-cut ham well, there it is. For the good of my own health I should never try and cook anything that’s more than one and a half spoons, and I guess we can also kiss goodbye to me getting any other kind of spooning in the near future as well can’t we, because when you’re nineteen being inept can be quite endearing but at my age? Well, I think I’ve reached a point where people sort of expect a soufflé don’t they?

Annie, she’d get it, because before she went vegan and started living off nuts and Diet Coke she once had him over for tea and literally set fire to chicken nuggets and then her hair trying to put the nuggets out by beating them with an oven glove. “So what’d he do?” she’d say. “Make a run for it?”

Nick glances at Harry, plotting the answer in his head: he just sort of hovered on the lawn, all pity and concern and a slight desire that none of it was happening, like when you go and visit someone in hospital and you know compassion is called for but really you resent them a little bit for making you go through something so unpleasant.

Nick presses his fingers more harshly onto the wood, trying to see the rest of the evening. It’s not like he had it all planned — some of it he was prepared to be spontaneous about, like the candlelit laughter he didn’t know whether to schedule between courses or during — but he’s not sure how to get from here to any of the things he’s spent the last few days imagining, like the person who thought this might go ok and the person who’s actually here in the moment are two entirely different entities.

“You all right?” Harry says.
“Perfect.”

It comes out snappish and Harry takes a little step back. “You want me to go? Like, if you’re not feeling up to it?”

Nick sort of does. He sort of wants to stew in his thoughts, properly whip up some frothing self-hatred; it’s the one thing he’s never needed a recipe for. Maybe he should be alone in a kitchen, scrubbing his failure where it’s stuck on the bottom of a non-stick pan, sinking to the floor and crying himself into a melodramatic pool, or in the wine cellar drinking himself into a pile of not caring and spiders. Would be a nice story for his book, he supposes.

He’s bored of those stories, though; he already has enough of them to fill a fucking library let alone a paperback.

“I bought quite a lot of dairy as it happens — need someone to help me eat it.”

Harry takes a breath and climbs up the rungs of the fence. It shakes as he swings one leg over the top and perches there. From where Nick’s sitting he looks like mostly knees and jawline, ink splash sky behind him like it exists just to make him look more dramatic against it. He gazes at the dark hills for a moment, eyes roving over the tree line and the way one hill almost curls into another, both of them falling away to a third smaller one. Harry rubs his hands together against the cold and half-smiles down at him. “Anyone tell you about those hills yet?”

“No, why?”

“Well — story goes that they’re not really hills.”

“What are they, then?”

“A dragon.” Harry lifts his hand and traces the bump of the middle hill with his finger. “See that bit’s its ribs and its belly, and that’s its leg — its thigh I guess and its knee all bunched up, and that there’s its snout.” Nick has to shuffle in closer to see what he’s pointing at, a little hillock with something that could be a cave or something at the foot. “And its tail goes all the way between the villages.”

“Bit grassy for a dragon, init?”

“It’s sleeping, the dragon,” Harry says. “It’s been asleep so long no one remembers how to wake it and the trees and everything have just grown over it.”

“So how d’you know it’s a dragon?”

“Because if you go up onto that hill and you sit down — it’s just a bit too warm, the ground, and if you really pay attention, you can hear its belly rumble with its breathing.”

Nick tilts his head like he might actually be able to hear it, a dragon snore on the breeze. “Why doesn’t it get up? What’s it waiting for?”

“Who says it’s waiting for anything?” Harry meets his eye and Nick can’t tell at all if he’s joking or if he really believes in dragons. “Why can’t it just be a dragon enjoying sleeping? When you thought it was a hill, you didn’t think it was waiting for anything.”

“Is this some sort of riddle? Or a metaphor?”

Harry drums lightly on the fence post next to Nick’s head. “I’ll take you up there one day, if you want. It’s a nice hike.”
“There’s no such thing as a nice hike.”

Harry smiles at his knees. “If you’re joking about exercise you must be feeling better.”

“Dragon’s cured me.”

“Or maybe you just needed a moment to be Nick, without anything else going on.”

It gets Nick the throat, those words.

How long has it been since that actually happened? Has he ever really known how to just be Nick rather than acting like who he thought Nick should be or re-writing himself so everything around him just became part of an anecdote? “Like a dragon that needs to be a hill for a bit? Is that where this is going?”

“M’not trying to be clever. I just wanted to tell you the story about the dragon.” Harry’s mouth crooks up at the corner. “You’re very suspicious of people, I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah well, maybe I got reason to be.”

“Of people maybe, but not of me, I hope.”

Nick stares at the grass. The breeze ripples over it and up the legs of his jeans, makes him feel like it’s doing a tango up his spine in spike heels made of ice. He shivers and Harry holds his hand out in invitation. Nick slips off the fence, lists into Harry, rests his head on Harry’s arm. He rearranges it around Nick’s shoulder and draws him into a hug, and it’s awkward because of the way Nick’s so much nearer his one arm than the other but nice, anyway. Harry’s coat’s soft wool and smells like it’s been in a cupboard with one of those sandalwood hearts people use to keep moths from biting holes into all their things. His aftershave curls into Nick’s nostrils, a mix of vanilla and smoke. It’s the kind of smell Nick would sometimes sample in a department store, not for himself but for an imaginary boyfriend who wore chunky sweaters and always knew exactly what to say and looked a bit like David Gandy.

Harry drops a kiss on his hair. Harry’s nothing like him, this imaginary man, but standing there, Nick’s hit with this feeling of safety and calm anyway. Just a little bit he believes there might be a dragon in the hillside, not waiting for anything, just sleeping, nice and easy and covered in grass.

Nick turns his head enough that when he stretches up, Harry leans down and kisses him, just this brief little fasten of his lips over Nick’s before he lands another tiny one on Nick’s forehead. “You ready to go back inside?” Harry mumbles, to his skin.

Nick looks back at the house. It’s like each stone has turned into a memory of his incompetence.

“I don’t care about dinner, Nick.”

Nick swallows, wraps his arm around himself. Apparently he’s completely transparent now to literally everyone.

“If the thing I cared about was culinary expertise,” Harry says, “I’d be hanging out with Barbara.”

“I care though. I care I can’t do normal things and get them right.”

“Sure you can — you made chutney, you made me that incredible cup of tea — ”

Nick rolls his eyes and Harry throws a leg over the fence post narrowly missing kicking him in the
He jumps down, hooks his arm through Nick’s, gives him a gentle little tug in the direction of the house. “Why don’t I just take you for noodles?”

He lets Harry pull him along even though his stomach is caving in with some kind of protest. At the door, Pig greets them with a wagging tail. Beyond her the kitchen is a disaster. The sink’s full of stuff he doesn’t even remember using, there’s a floury handprint on the front of the oven like the warning sign in a zombie film, and the onion’s sitting raw and menacing in a milk bath with the consistency of cheap foundation.

“They do black bean,” Harry says, peering at Nick hopefully.

“What, like abandon ship? What if we both die on that fucking hill no one drives with any sense of self-preservation on and this is all that’s left? I don’t want to be remembered like this, like that guy from some kind of fish pie disaster Marie Celeste.”

“Fine,” Harry says, and it really does sound like he’s trying not to laugh. “We’ll launch a salvage operation.”

Harry takes off his coat and drapes it over the back of the nearest dining chair. Underneath he’s all in black, shirt unbuttoned at his neck, silky material skimming his body and tucked into tight black jeans. Very tight black jeans.

And Nick knew, obviously, what he looked like, but usually he’s cosy and cuddly and a bit ragged round the edges. Nick feels like one of those cartoon characters who just got steamrollered right over.

“Have some water.” Harry hands him a glass and for something to do with his eyes and his hands, Nick sips at it and tries to really feel it trickle down his throat.

“Do you think we can rescue it?” Nick says, gesturing at the pans.

Harry peers into them one by one. “Hmmm,” he says. He opens the fridge and bends down into it, surveying the options.

If Nick were a cartoon character who just got steamrollered, this would definitely be the moment where he re-emerges on the other side of the wheel, just so his eyes could come out on stalks and then his body could peel off it in a big flop.

Harry’s not promising. He’s not one of those guys Nick has to make a list about in order to decide if he likes them or not, one of the ones who come out just marginally ahead in the plus column because he cheats and starts including things like probably isn’t a serial killer. He’s the one Nick would still like even if he were a serial killer. He’s the jumpsuit-palms-against-the-glass-prison-telephone-conversation person, even though Nick’s not even sure they have those phones in English prisons.

After a moment Harry looks at him askance. “What?” he says.

“You scrub up all right don’t you?”

Harry tucks his hair behind his ear and smiles at his shoes. “You too, you look — ”

“I look the same as always, except sweatier and lightly floured.”

“Yeah, well, I always like the way you look.” He tucks his chin in like he’s shy, but then his gaze comes up to meet Nick’s and there’s nothing coy about it at all.

And Nick is into it. By god, he’s into it.
He puts his glass down — in fact it’s close to a slam — and gets right into his space, thinking Harry’ll laugh, but he doesn’t, so Nick slides his hand under his hair, cups the back of his neck, and kisses him.

Harry’s lips are cold but they part and inside there’s a hint of furnace on his tongue as it flickers against Nick’s. Gratitude and desire all mix up into one, Nick can’t help it — he thinks of dragons in the hills and Harry offering him his coat and the only way to properly express the way it churns him up inside is to press Harry against the counter. Harry’s breathless and urgent against his mouth and honestly it’s all a little more than Nick was expecting from him. He pulls away to look at him, to check he’s real, to check he’s not imagining this from the floor of the wine cellar in a puddle of spiders and self-pity.

Harry chases his mouth, straining for another kiss under Nick’s fingers.

Nick glances at the mess on the counter. “We should —”

“Fuck the pie, Nick,” Harry mumbles and gives his jumper an impatient tug.

“That’s a little kinkier than I usually get on a first date to be honest.”

Harry sniggers, and it’s just enough to soften it, the way they’re looking at each other.

“I’m sorry about the —”

“Shhh.” Harry wraps his arms around Nick’s neck and kisses him again, all slow and deep and quivery, this time.

Nick goes with it, running his hand from Harry’s hair down to the lowest dip of his back, tracing the hollow there as he pulls him in. Harry actually moans as they connect, scratches up against Nick’s scalp, and makes Nick’s stomach do a really good impression of when he’s on a plane and they’re hurtling down the runway. A nip at his lip and that’s it, take off, like the heady jolt of lifting away from the earth at 700 miles an hour.

When they break apart, Harry’s looking at him, all dazed and somehow sweet even though two seconds ago he was making the kind of noises Nick used to panic about his mum hearing when he crept on the family computer after everyone went to bed to use a Craig David video as porn.

Nick glances at the kitchen again, even though he doesn’t make any effort to move away from where he’s got Harry effectively pinned to the worktop. “Maybe we should just go out.”

“We can’t do this at the noodle bar,” Harry says, and bites at his chin. “Besides, I was promised candles.”

“You were promised a fag lighter if I recall.”

“Either way, get to it, Nicholas.”

He says Nick’s name like it’s something he possesses and gives him a light slap on the hip that makes Nick feel like he’s doing some kind of cartwheel without moving.

Harry declares the bay-infested poaching milk irretrievable and tasks Nick with breaking up the fish while he drains the potatoes. He brings them all together, shapes them into patties, and fries them carefully in the old blackened wrist-breaking pan while Nick tosses some spinach into a bowl. Nick did find candles — and a candelabra that he had wild intentions of decorating with stuff from the garden like Kirsty Allsop would — but he settles for just setting the thing at the end of the table.
where his favourite chairs are and lighting it. It gives the room a pleasant-ish glow at any rate and by
the time he’s laid the table it looks a little bit romantic.

They eat with their feet touching and Harry updates him on all his patients, including the alpaca
who’s easily startled and has a show name twelve words long, takes him on an amble through his
plans for Mrs Whitstable and Florence. He’s already sent off for some fancy ingredients and he
thinks maybe it might be a nice idea to print out some old photos and make a scrapbook if they can
find them from picture archives, give them a starting point of things to talk about. Nick — for once
— just rests his chin on his hand and lets Harry talk until all that’s left on both plates is a few crumbs.
It’s nothing like the suave wooing Nick was attempting, or if it is, he’s on entirely the other end of it.

“You want pudding? I got whole freezer full, apparently.”

Harry reaches across the table for his hand. “Maybe later,” he says, lacing their fingers together as he
gets up. “Need to digest a bit.” He tugs even though Nick’s already going with it and grabbing their
wine glasses with a move he thinks is actually rather swish. Harry walks backwards through the
kitchen and the lounge to the sofa, plonks down and undoes his boots so he can shove them off with
his toes, reaches for the remote even before the second one has hit the floor.

“Put whatever you want on, don’t mind me.”

“I don’t want Pig to miss her favourite or she’ll resent me being here.”

The TV buzzes to life and Nick sits next to him, reaches for his wine to sip at while Harry flips
through the channels. He settles on something with golden eagles and David Attenborough and Nick
stares at him. “This is not Autumn Watch.”

“She’s a dog, Nick, it’s close enough.”

“That is a shocking attitude for a professional.”

Harry rolls his eyes and steals Nick’s wine glass out of his hand. He takes a gulp which sees for most
of its contents, nestles the glass on the coffee table, and takes Nick’s hand again, using it to pull
Nick’s arm around his shoulder. He settles back so pleased with his efforts his cheek dimples.

“Oh, I see. Concern for Pig’s welfare is just a ruse.”

“Watch, it’s educational.”

He trains his eyes on the screen but his fingers are busy sliding their way between Nick’s. He runs
the pad of his thumb down Nick’s knuckle, over the back of his hand just soft enough to tickle.

Nick is a big fan of David Attenborough usually but right now he couldn’t give less of a fuck about
eagles. He toys with Harry’s fingers all through a montage about how they select nesting sites and
how the scarcity of prey affects their breeding habits and the endeavors of various wildlife groups to
help out. Harry worms himself closer until he’s practically sitting on Nick’s leg and Nick decides
he’s had enough and turns into him to mouth at his shoulder.

Harry doesn’t look at him but he straightens in response, holds his breath as Nick noses at the stiffer
silky material of his collar. As Nick gets closer Harry keeps his eyes on the screen, just lifting his jaw
slightly to expose more of his neck.

Chasing the scent of vanilla and smoke, Nick lowers his mouth to Harry’s skin. He flattens his
tongue to it before he draws his lips together and slips up to the next patch. Harry’s eyelids flutter —
close so briefly he could almost claim it as a blink if it weren’t for the soft, fast breath pushing out
through his lips. Been a while since Nick made anybody actually squirm and he presses his advantage, moving one of Harry’s curls out of the way and offering an experimental scrape of teeth over where it used to sit.

Harry makes a dull *guh* noise, doesn’t move while Nick kisses all the way up to his ear, so slowly Harry’s openmouthed by the time he gets there. He turns his head, and when Nick meets his mouth, Harry gasps against his lips and digs his fingertips into Nick’s cheek to keep him there. Not that Nick had any intention of abandoning him when Harry kisses like Nick’s all his fantasies on top of each other, in little snatches like he’s trying to sample all of them in quick succession in case they disappear. He shifts closer, knocking their knees together, but when Harry moves his head he catches Nick’s glasses and knocks them askew. He draws back, frowning at them in accusation. Very gently he lifts the arms up off Nick’s ears before removing them completely. He folds them up and sets them on the coffee table, and then he’s back, tilting his head to look at Nick’s eyes like something about them might have drastically changed. It’s Nick’s nose that gets his attention, though. He touches the bridge where Nick’s glasses were, spreads his fingers out like he’s covering the freckles on his cheek, smile a sweet curve.

“I can’t see now,” Nick says. “How’m I supposed to follow what’s happening with the eagles?”

“You’re not.”

Harry finds his mouth, kisses him with such a new surge of feeling Nick tastes nothing but hunger in his mouth. He presses back into him to try and squash it into something more manageable, regain some kind of control, because his body’s decided to free fall inside of itself and he’s not sure how to get his thoughts to catch up. He focuses on the feel of Harry’s lips, the tingles underneath them, the way when their tongues meet they stop feeling like tongues and turn into a short cut jolt to every nerve.

They settle into a back and forth, winding each other up with fingers and lips and tongues, and when Nick tries to check what the eagles on the telly are doing or tell a joke to take things down a notch, Harry catches Nick by the jumper and tugs him back with a whine, meeting his mouth with a smile when he gets his own way.

After a while, Nick lifts Harry’s legs into his lap, eliciting a delightful little surprised noise. He skims the knees of Harry’s jeans, palm tingling at the rough denim, runs his hand down the harsh plane of his shin, over the crest of his knobbly ankle, and all the way down to his feet, newly settled on Nick’s other side. He traces over his socks with his thumb and Harry twists his fingers in Nick’s hair to pull Nick closer. Nick forgets about his feet for a moment because he’s too busy kissing him, takes his face in his hand to get right into it. And Harry likes that too but apparently not as much; he moves Nick’s touch back down, going a noodley kind of frantic when Nick squeezes his toes, flexing them back. Nick alternates pressing his thumb into the arch and skimming lightly, traces up all the way to his heel, smiling against Harry’s mouth as he screws his toes up to try and get away from him, pulling Nick’s face closer at the same time.

Nick likes it, having him at his mercy when so often around Harry he feels hopelessly off balance, traces patterns over the rucks that pool at his ankle before going back to where the cotton’s taut across the underneath. He finds a frayed hole in Harry’s sock right on the ball of his foot. He knew, obviously, that underneath Harry’s clothes he had a body — flesh and bone all wrapped up in metres and meters of the skin — but the intimacy of it still surprises him. He circles it before touching the exposed skin deliberately, mind a clamour of thought and feeling.

When it gets too much he retreats back to Harry’s ankle, which even in his current state might be hard pressed to find sexy, and Harry breaks away. His lips are flushed and his eyes are huge and he
looks a pleasant kind of startled as he clings to the shoulder of Nick’s jumper and his hair. “Want to kiss you all night,” he says, and Nick should think it’s a horrible lazy cliché but he imbues it with such sincerity, Nick can only smile.

Harry pulls him in again, meeting his mouth hard and urgent, tugging on his jumper until Nick can’t stay upright anymore. They slide flat, Harry underneath him with his legs hooked awkwardly over Nick’s hip, and Nick tries to rearrange them but they seem to have grown extra knees. He finds almost enough space once Harry gets a leg underneath him, has a flash of panic about how much he’s been eating lately and if he’s too heavy, but if Harry’s uncomfortable it’s entirely his own fault. And Harry doesn’t seem to be. Quite the opposite, in fact; he moans as Nick settles on him, wraps his arms around Nick’s shoulders.

He shifts against Harry, trying to work out what’s too much and what’s not quite enough by the pace of his kisses, and he finds Harry likes slow pressure from his hips, likes it even more when Nick hooks his fingers under his knee and brings his leg up around him, settling in the V of Harry’s legs. “Fuck,” he mumbles, and it fires through Nick like an impulse in a sci-fi film, hot and red and sparkly. He slips off Harry’s mouth to kiss his neck, revisiting all the places he kissed before, Harry stretching up into his mouth and his hands skating down Nick’s back like he’s too turned on to decide where they should land.

Nick pauses in the hollow of his collarbone, breathing hot and hard and trying to decide how far he should go. Harry’s chest heaves underneath him, skin goose bumped between the black material, nipples unavoidably standing proud. Sliding a hand up Harry’s side, Nick makes for one, thumbs over the nub of it, looking up at Harry to check he hasn’t crossed the line. His eyes are fluttering and he sucks half his lip between his teeth and bites on it so Nick lowers his mouth to the exposed bit of Harry’s chest, licks over the hollow right in the middle, and mouths across the material before going back to Harry’s mouth. He grins as he kisses him, gets one back when he thumbs Harry’s nipple again, breaks away just far enough to look at him. His hair’s all staticky and clinging to the sofa’s arm and he looks far too pleased with himself as he worms a hand down Nick’s side to dig his fingers in and tickle him, make him squirm in a way that his face indicates was what he was going for. Nick catches his fingers and holds them still, bringing them up between them.

“All right?” Nick says. His voice is quieter and softer than he intended and Harry nods, readjusting his position so he’s not quite so squashed up against the sofa arm.

The background comes back, the TV’s moved on to the dun dun dun of the headlines on the news, and Pig’s snuffling at something, noise of her slobbering only apparent now they’re not making noises of their own.

It’s always weirded Nick out a bit, how little space two of you can take up when you really try, how normally two people on a sofa means just arses and thighs and it barely feels big enough, but that there’s room for all of both of you if you’re prepared to squash in. Makes him think, then, about space and how it sits between you, how there are only certain scenarios in which doing away with it are allowed, but before he gets very far with it, Harry’s kissing him again — slower this time, less urgent, like a sleepy teasing sort of kiss that’s going nowhere in particular.

They stay like that until the news dun dun duns its way into the weather. Harry glances over at the screen. “Uh,” he says, like that actually means something. Nick interprets it as an expression like, ‘it’s late’ and presses a kiss to where Harry’s jaw meets his ear.

“You staying?”

“You want me to?” Harry says, low, almost a whisper while he plays with Nick’s hair.
“Yes. You want to go up?”

Harry swallows.

“Come on, then,” Nick says.

They let Pig out for a run around the garden and Nick tidies a few things away while Harry leans on the doorway to watch her, night air making his shirt ripple like he’s in a music video. Nick abandons the glasses he was rinsing and goes over to wrap both arms around him from behind. He kisses his ear and Harry grins and rocks from side to side, curling his hands up over Nick’s forearms.

Upstairs, they don’t turn the lights on. Nick undoes the buttons of Harry’s silky shirt and runs his thumbs over Harry’s ribs. There are splodges of ink on his skin and Nick traces them with his tongue without trying to work out what they are, moving lower until he’s on his knees. He skims Harry’s thighs with his hands and –

“I got to be up early,” Harry murmurs, rocking back on his heels.

“How long do you think this is going to take me, exactly?” Nick says, peering up at him as he places a kiss just under his bellybutton.

Harry presses his lips together, conflicted, maybe, his stomach fluttering under where Nick’s breathing. “You mind if we… don’t?” he says, eventually, and inelegantly, Nick gets to his feet. At his frown of confusion, Harry avoids his eyes and mumbles, “Sorry.”

“Hey,” Nick says, and touches his jaw to make him look up. “It’s fine.”

To try and demonstrate it, he tugs off his jumper, balls it up and throws it at the laundry basket, does the same with his jeans before sliding under the covers. He beckons for Harry to join him, and Harry shucks off his remaining clothes and gets in next to him. “I’ll try not to wake you when I leave,” Harry says, setting the time on his phone.

“No, wake me, otherwise I’ll be panicking you left because you decided you don’t like me.”

Harry stops midway through pulling the duvet up and looks at him for a really long time. “You know that’s not – you know I do, right?”

At the roll of Nick’s eyes, he leans in and kisses Nick thoroughly, and when he pulls away, his eyes are glassy and a bit too intense to look at in the dark. “I had –” He strokes Nick’s ear, catching the lobe between his thumb and his forefinger and rubbing over where Nick once had a very ill-advised earring. “– I had a really lovely time tonight,” he says.

Nick forces a smile, pulls him in to lie on his chest, fumbles a kiss onto his forehead, and wonders if Harry can feel the frantic canter of his heart.
Lost Weekend

It’s weird how much information we have about romantic relationships when we’re kids. Cartoons teach us from the get go about the rules of courting, that there should be flowers and flattery, and we get told at school that if people are mean to you it might mean they like you. By the time you get to actual puberty, you’re nothing but preconceived ideas about the way it all should go that you learned from cartoon mice and people who should know better than to pass on lies.

It leaves very little room to decide for yourself who you want to be as a partner, never mind the added confusion that comes from being gay. I used to sit around trying to work it out: if I’m a boy and I like a boy, should I give him flowers or hit him? I didn’t really want to do the latter and the former seemed quite unfeasible, a chain of events that started with me in Sainsbury’s with my mum trying to explain why I wanted to add a nice bunch of roses to the trolley to take to school with me on the off chance I could make it all the way through the bus journey and the playground with them and myself intact in order to give them to Sam from 9B. When the best I could expect was that he’d punch me in the face and I’d have to decide if it was a rejection or reciprocation, it seemed rather more hassle than it was worth.

I don’t recall there being much in my childhood media consumption which actually reflected the complexity of it all, that I wouldn’t go from goo-ey eyes to one perfect backlit kiss to marriage between commercial breaks, that I’d give myself anxiety over when’s too early to text someone and how to cope with accidentally liking a 59w old picture on Instagram. I was unprepared for the way the landscape would become ever increasingly complicated, that I’d lie awake all night thanks to journalists and bloggers shrieking out does and don’ts, as if the reason I would never find happiness was that on the second date I used the word ‘arsebiscuits’.

If everyone — me included — could just chill the fuck out about it all, it would go a great long way to making us all happier, but in the face of a lifetime of being told there’s a way to do things and a certain path to be followed, there’s a huge difference between knowing you should chill out and actually being able to do it.

~*~

Nick wakes with a start, even though Harry roused him — as requested — to tell him he was leaving for work, gave him a kiss and a cuddle before slipping out into the cold and the harsh artificial light of the bathroom. He pats the chair next to the bed to find his glasses and slips them on, ignoring the pounding of his illogical heart. Noticing he’s awake, Pig lumbers up onto the covers for a snuggle and Nick protests at the way she gets him right in the bladder with a rear paw at the same time as rubbing her ears.

In the past, he’s always done ok with waking up with someone, be it a guy he picked up at a club or a friend he finally stumbled over the line with. You wake up partially clothed and tangled together and it’s easy to know what to do with that, easy to slip into reaffirming you like each other. Less so when you’re on your own with nothing but memories and a vague tingle in your guts and a kind of curling sadness that one phase of who you are to each other has passed.

He lets Pig distract him, pushing her over onto her back to rub her belly, telling himself not to think all the things which are pushing on the edge of his consciousness — that he’ll never see Harry again, that he will but he’ll want to go back to being just friends, that somehow he’s too much at the same time as not enough for him.
When he finally gets up, he finds Harry’s abandoned his own clothes at the foot of the bed; Nick supposes a sheer black shirt isn’t exactly the ideal attire for making pork pies and selling custard tarts to pensioners — although it might’ve contributed to filling his tip jar. He opens the drawer to see which item Harry pilfered. He’s, of course, taken Nick’s biggest jumper — a black thing with artistic ladders all up the back which make it totally impractical from a warmth perspective and a stripy t-shirt that probably looks miles better on him than it ever did on Nick. He pulls out his blindfolded rapper jumper and goes into the bathroom for a wee, turning on the shower to heat up, thinking nonsense about not wanting to wash Harry’s fingerprints off his skin.

Once he’s sufficiently showered, he saunters downstairs to tidy up the leftover mess from dinner and makes himself a coffee. Harry obviously fed Pig on his way out so he gives her lets her out into the garden, sits on the doorstep with a cigarette and the cold biting at his exposed ankles to watch her ferret a stick out of the long grass and drag herself around in a circle with it. He feels weird already, worrying about how he’ll cope if Harry doesn’t come back, wonders about texting him, but his friends always used to tell him off for ignoring the rules about playing hard to get. Not that doing as they said ever really got him anywhere. The one time he tried it and didn’t text someone he actually really did like back for 48 hours, he left the country and still hasn’t come back.

Finishing his coffee, he grabs his phone and shoots Harry a message to bring him a pasty for lunch. He’s not needy, he’s just trying to secure food. Survival is important. Pig trots back, grass caught all around the end of the stick she’s procured. She gets it.

His phone buzzes in his hand and Nick looks down at the screen, but where he expects to see Harry’s name it says Unknown. He stands up and slides to answer, pacing down to where he gets better signal, grass chill and tickly against his bare feet. “Hello?”

“Yes, good morning. I’m calling for a Nick — he left me a message of somewhat great importance regarding a friend of mine and —”

“Florence?” Too late Nick realises he probably should’ve started at Ms. Dudley and waited to be invited to use her first name.

“Yes. To whom am I speaking?”

“It’s me,” Nick says. “Nick. Grimshaw. Hi.” He was more eloquent the time he called Dolly Parton, honestly. “How you doing? We’ve been waiting for you to call.”

“I just returned from Switzerland,” she says. She has one of those voices from another era, like a radio announcer from the war who delivered devastation with perfectly enunciated clipped syllables. “I must say I was rather taken aback — Joanie has always been of a rather robust constitution and to hear of her predicament was quite shocking. Might I inquire, how is she? Worsened, or —”

“Doing all right,” Nick says. “Her hip’s the main problem so don’t expect her in any marathons anytime soon. Other day we took her some flowers for a visit and I think it might’ve perked her up a bit. Not nice, though, not being able to stay in your own home.”

“Quite.”

There’s a pause, and Nick resists his natural urge — built up over many years of callers who turned awkward unexpectedly on air — to fill the gap with questions about what she’s up to and if she has any plans for the weekend. “Thing is,” he says, “we were wondering — me and Harry that is — if you’d want to come and see her? We know you haven’t been in touch in a while but —”

“Of course,” Florence says. “My usual assistant has a terrible case of flu and I’m quite lost without
“Ok, let me just —” Nick fumbles around his pockets for a pen because that seems like the sort of thing an assistant might do, but because he’s not one, he doesn’t have one. The only thing he’s got secreted about his person is a fag lighter and a small handful of gravel, the origins of which are, now he’s thinking about it, a total mystery. He settles for concentrating very hard on what she’s saying, like he’s making a mental Post-It. “So when were you thinking?”

“I regret to say I have immoveable appointments until Thursday, which is when I intended to return to Basel — but flights can be rescheduled. When would be convenient? I assume there are visiting hours, one can’t just drive up whenever one feels like it? I will also require the address for the driver.”

Nick reels it off, along with the various times he apparently memorised from the sign on the desk. They agree on Friday, since Nick knows Harry has most of the day off.

“I must make arrangements,” Florence says. “Can I reach you on this number when I have something in place?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Her voice goes a bit throatier. “I can’t thank you enough for letting me know. I would’ve been so…” She makes a noise that’s halfway between a sigh and a laugh. “Well, it doesn’t do to dwell.”

They say goodbye and Nick hangs up, hugging himself across the chest against the cold and jogging back to the house, trying to keep all the details straight in his head. He saves Florence’s number and texts Harry again:

*We have lift off!!!*

And then decides that’s probably a bit cryptic and adds:

*(Florence called)*

He spends the rest of the morning pottering around, humming along with the Rolling Stones playlist he made on his laptop when he probably should’ve been writing instead of having an endless debate with himself about whether he would still shag Mick Jagger or not. He’s arranging some foliage and dried up thistles he clipped from the garden in a vase when Harry lets himself in, pink in the face from cold and exertion, both arms laden with shopping bags.

“I said *a* pasty,” Nick says, by way of greeting before he goes over to take a bag from him, heart dancing in his chest.

“Cold,” Harry says, rooted to the spot. “Colder than it should be.”

“Should’ve stolen one of my jumpers that goes all the way round,” Nick says. He lifts the bag onto the work surface in the kitchen, busying his hands in the hope it’ll make his mind be quiet instead of debating with itself why Harry wouldn’t want a blow job and coming to all the worst conclusions. “What’s all this anyway?”

“I need to get started. One of the cakes I want to do needs some stuff soaking.” Harry peels off his coat and hangs it up, toeing off his boots and rubbing his socked feet together. Nick glances at them, hot under his skin at the memory of getting temporarily obsessed with the hole in his socks. What if Harry thinks he’s got a thing for that? What if that’s why? What if he *does* have a thing for that?
Harry brings his other bag over to join Nick’s. “You not going to offer to help warm me up?” He meets Nick’s eye with a cautious smile, which goes some way to putting the brakes on Nick’s cantering thoughts.

Nick reaches for him, tucks Harry into him, his skin chill and his hair smelling of flour and butter. He rubs at his arms. “Better?”

“Yes thank you.” Harry lets him go with a little nod. “We best get started on Mrs. W’s muffins.”

“Kitchen’s not exactly well equipped.”

“S’fine,” Harry says, with a shrug. “I brought everything I need.”

Nick clamps his teeth against the thought he came back here even though it involved dragging half a kitchen with him when he could’ve used to pub or stayed at the Bakery. “Don’t suppose you remembered my — ”

Harry thrusts a paper bag at him. “It’s the all-day breakfast one,” he says. “Bacon, mushroom, beans and stuff.”

Taking it, Nick undoes the top to a waft of warm pastry smell and streaky bacon. “I think I’m in love,” he says to its golden turned over end, and Harry snorts a laugh.

Harry spends the rest of the afternoon slipping around Nick’s kitchen in his socks, dancing between opening cupboards and improvising where necessary what he needs to bake with. He turns the oven on on his first try and finds a set of scales which have actual tiny cast iron weights, and instead of being flummoxed like Nick would be as to how to actually work ye olde food technology, he gets it straight away, that you stack them on one side and what you want to weigh needs to balance them out. He greases one of the shiny tins he stole from work and sets to it, heating the heavy pan from last night on the stove before peeling apples and handing them to Nick to chop, his fingers lingering just lightly on Nick’s elbow as he tells him they need to be in equal size pieces.

After last night, Nick’s wary, but Harry slides in next to him. “You just —” He slices one side off the apple, then the next, then the next, until he’s left with just the core in a square. He flattens the pieces on the chopping board. “— and then….” He chops them into a series of perfect bite-size chunks and Nick knows he’s doing it at about a tenth the speed he would normally so Nick can see and it makes his stomach do something funny. He hands Nick the knife and lightly touches the small of Nick’s back. “Ok?”

Panic rises, prickly, up Nick’s chest at the thought of messing it up when their recipient is depending on them, but he takes a leaf out of Harry’s book and tries to stay calm about it, rehearses each step in his head before he does it, and tries to take his time. It seems to work and he ends up with a few, slightly browning, handfuls of apple which actually don’t look like he’s just thrown them at a knife block from a great distance.

“Whack ‘em in,” Harry says, tapping the side of the pan with a wooden spoon and surveying them with a pleased little smile.

While Nick’s been working on the apples, he’s been stirring brown sugar and spices into a sauce that smells like an incredibly fancy Christmas air freshener. It’s thick, doesn’t even splatter when Nick drops the apples in, and Harry folds the sauce over them and stirs.

“What now?”
“Wait for them to soften.”

He’s not even looking at a recipe and Nick knows it’s what Harry’s been doing for years, this sort of thing, but it still impresses him that Harry just knows, that he’s not reliant on a Nigella or Delia or Mary Berry to keep him on the right track.

Harry leaves the apples to it and goes back to the bowl he’s been assembling ingredients in. Nick picks out flour and more sugar and a sprinkling of something brown before Harry drops a chunk of something hard and white and shiny in it.

“Is that lard?” he says, unable to stop himself from sounding alarmed.

Harry meets his eye with a look of horror of his own. “Coconut oil?”

“Oh.” Nick pokes at the apples while Harry stirs all his ingredients together, heat from the oven rising from the region of his knees and the pleasant smell of fruit and spices all over him. Piece of cake, this.

“So how was she, when you spoke to her, Florence?” Harry says.

“Posh.”

“Posh?”

“Like probably has a dish for her soap posh.”

“You have a dish for your soap, though.”

Nick works his lip between his teeth. “I didn’t buy a dish for the soap, it was just here, so I’m using it.”

“So you don’t have one, like, at home?” Harry glances at him like he’s asking something far bigger than a soap dish.

“No, I just — I got a little stack of face cloths, I keep it on there. Except in the guest rooms —”

“Guest rooms? You’ve got more than one guest room?”

“Only two?” Nick says, ignoring the fact he put a sofa bed in the room he calls his office specifically so it could also be a guest room. “In those I got this lime and coriander hand soap which I bought exclusively because it looks really nice with the towels when you look at them all in the mirror.”

“That’s a lot of thought for soap.”

Nick doesn’t tell him it wasn’t even his own thought, that he had a decorator come in and arrange some things because he was bored of looking at it all unfinished and he had a friend from America scheduled and no idea whether he was going to be a guest room friend or an in-his-bed friend so he tried to cover both. “She was glad we called her, anyway.” Nick says, steering the conversation away from what he wasn’t expecting to be a soap-based minefield. “She’s rearranging her trip back to Switzerland and everything.”

“So… she lives abroad now?”

“Didn’t say, but maybe.”

“Oh.” Harry grabs the pan with the apples in, gives them a shake, then decides they’ve done
whatever he thinks they should’ve and pours them into the bowl. He lets the pan drop back on the stove with a clang and stirs the two mixtures together, his tongue peeking out between his lips.

Nick hooks his finger into one of the runs in his jumper and gives it a little tug. “’S’not that far. Things go well she can arrange to pop back more often. Probably only take her a few hours — not that much different to someone in, say, London coming up here.”

Harry ignores him in favour of grabbing the greased tin and spooning portions of mixture in. He does one spoonful per hole, then reassesses how much he’s got left and fills them up accordingly, each one getting the same amount, rather than what Nick would do, which is fill the first half to the brim, panic, and then declare the rest mini muffins and pretend it’s what he intended all along when half the batch comes out gigantic and the rest less a muffin than a charred disk.

He grabs the oven glove, which is already burnt at both ends almost all the way through, and opens the oven door, releasing a waft of heat that gets Nick right in the glasses. Nick misses him sliding the tin onto the shelf but the clunk of the oven door closed again tells him it’s happened, and when he unfogs, Harry’s stealing his phone and setting a timer on it. “Whereabouts is it, your house?” he says, like he’s trying to be casual.

“Hackney.”

Harry nods and Nick wonders if he has any idea where that actually is, because when he still lived at home, London had no boroughs or desirable areas, it was just one amorphous mass of houses and shops and excitement. Took him nearly three years to even really develop an opinion on which were the bits he liked and felt at home with, moving as he did where he could find space he could afford at first. “I got a nice big park right on the doorstep,” Nick says, “couple of good little shops and loads of my friends live there.” He leaves out that one of his primary reasons for moving was that photographers can rarely be arsed to travel that far out for a photo of you staggering home worse for wear or walking the dog with a hangover and mismatched trainers on. “Think you’d like it,” he says, although there’s no basis whatsoever for assuming that’s the case and even Nick’s not sure he likes it yet. He hasn’t even finished buying furniture, unsure who he was trying to be every time he tried to pick something. It’s one reason he came here to finish his book; the conflicted sides of himself as he stared at the wall he’d painted with squares of so many different colours were too much to deal with.

Harry fixes a smile which reminds Nick of the one he wore when they went to see Mrs. Whitstable. “Twenty minutes,” he says.

They split a muffin when they’re still hot from the oven. Harry informs him of the benefits of cooking the apples first and using coconut oil and not butter, although makes Nick promise not to tell Mrs. Whitstable that’s what’s in them because she won’t eat anything he makes if she thinks it’s good for her. “Woman after my own heart,” Nick mumbles, and tears off another piece. “These are definitely better than those detox ones or whatever they were.”

“They taste fine if you have them with a carrot and apple juice rather than a pint.”

“There’s a snack combination for the ages,” Nick says. “Nuggets and milkshake, salt and vinegar crisps and a Lucozade, carrot and apple juice and a health muffin.”

Harry pokes him in the side in admonishment. When Nick bats his hand away he smiles up at him all coy and suggestive and Nick really wants to kiss him. He steps into Harry’s space but Nick’s never been sure about this part, when he’s been to bed with someone but they’re still acting like mates. In a way, he likes it, takes the pressure off and stops him feeling like he’s not allowed to be himself
anymore, that he needs to suddenly switch into this mode of dating, where he softens his opinions and his jokes and asks a load of questions about their childhood to create the impression they’re connecting. Hates it too, though, not knowing quite how it works, if they’re mates during the day and more than that at night, when he can hide in the dark in case the thing he’s feeling is something he’s alone with. He keeps hold of Harry’s hand, ostensibly to stop him tickling him. “You trying to start something, Styles?” he says.

“Yep.”

“Really.”

Apparently, that’s enough for Harry, because he pushes up onto his toes and brings Nick’s mouth to his. He tastes like spiced apple and something faintly metallic and Nick can’t quite get enough of it. He explores Harry’s mouth with his tongue like he didn’t spend most of last night doing it, abandons the muffin entirely. They take a step, back for Harry and forward for Nick, and bump into the counter.

“Uh,” Harry says, which is about how Nick feels. Harry assess the situation for a few seconds and then pushes up to sit on the work surface, knocking the bowls they were using into each other with his arse. He curls a foot around Nick’s hip and draws him in, wrapping his arms around Nick’s neck as soon as he’s close enough to do it, smiling against Nick’s mouth as Nick fits between his legs. It’s not the ideal arrangement — where he’s sitting is not really big enough so he’s perched on the edge quite precariously — but Nick leans into him and winds his fingers into the holes in his jumper, thinking he might stay here for a bit anyway.

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Once upon a lifetime ago, Saturday night meant consuming half a bottle of vodka before he was even done blow drying his hair into a passable shape to be viewed by humans or at the very least a gallery opening where he’d pretend he hadn’t had one too many free cocktails and try not to accidentally buy something expensive. Now apparently, it means sitting on a fence outside a cowshed with a cup of hot chocolate — in a real mug, mind — while two blokes film each other talking about the importance of choosing the right kind of bedding for cattle during the colder months. Nick wraps his fingers around his mug, trying to steal some more warmth from it, kicks his frozen feet against the wooden strut they’re resting on, trying to force some blood into his toes.

The light of the camera bounces off Harry’s face as he tells Niall and whoever might be watching that they’re going to go inside and see if all the cows are snug. “Be nice if someone is,” Nick mutters, and Harry meets his eye over Niall’s shoulder with a kind of half-hearted smirk.

“I told you to put boots on,” he says.

“When you said fun Saturday plans I thought you meant the pub or something.”

Niall turns to look at Nick from inside the hood of a coat that’s more like two blankets sewn together underneath a waterproof lining. It makes a tunnel around his face so it’s like looking at him through a pair of binoculars. “Can have a lend of some wellies if you want,” he says. “Me dad’s old ones are in there.” He jerks his head towards the cowshed, cloud of breath obscuring most of his face.

“Will they be warmer?”
“Not really,” Niall says, “but walking there and back to get ‘em might help.”

Nick huddles down further inside his coat, melodramatically working his scarf up over his chin and sighing at the dark. The wool smells like an aftershave he hasn’t worn in months and transports him back to a party, one he didn’t want to be at but felt obliged to attend, where he had the mother of all awkward conversations with one of his former producers who had a few too many and then went through the entire litany of his failings. He tightens his grip on the mug; maybe this isn’t so bad after all. “I’m fine,” he says. “Do that bit again though and maybe instead of standing there and then going into the cowshed, put the camera on that thing —” He points at a hunk of ancient machinery outside the door. “— then walk towards it and talk at the same time. Make it feel a bit more like a conversation people have just happened to get to sit in on.” Harry lifts an eyebrow at him. “S’what they do on *Countryfile*,” Nick says, and adds a shrug.

Niall and Harry take his advice anyway: Niall sets up the camera on the rusted ledge of whatever piece of farm equipment it used to be, hobbles around to see if Harry’s in focus, bouncing his hands together to keep them warm. “You’re in shot,” he shouts to Nick.

“You want me to move?”

“Up to you.” He hobbles back over the frosty grass to join them and Nick weighs appearing in the background of a YouTube video about cow husbandry versus losing what warmth he’s managed to accrue and decides he can’t be arsed. “Ready?”

Nick sips his hot chocolate as they walk towards the camera, chatting about straw and hay and if there’s technically any difference, Niall’s uneven gait struggling to match Harry’s long stride. Harry fucks up something and insists on starting again, but the next time he nails it, gets all the information he wants to give timed perfectly so he’s just finishing when they step inside the barn.

Niall retrieves the camera and beckons Nick to join them. He hops down off the fence and wraps his coat around himself to jog across the field, and Harry greets him with a kiss to his cheek. Niall looks away from both of them like he’s not supposed to have seen and slips a little on the wet concrete of the barn floor. He catches himself on the railing around one of the pens and Harry darts forward to take the camera. “Here, I’ll do it,” he says. “Up here?”

He’s already climbing up the railings to settle the camera on the ledge that sits underneath one of the windows that must throw dawn light in to tell the herd it’s time to get outside and start working through their extensive to do list of mooing, cud chewing, and grass eating. “You all right?” Nick asks as Niall hobbles into position, wincing, and Niall looks like he’d quite like the barn floor to open up and swallow him.

“Trying to break the other one to match,” he says, and he leans on the top rail around the pen for support.

Mabel — at least Nick thinks it’s Mabel — ambles over to nudge at his arm with her greasy-looking nose, and it probably frames the shot nicely, having her there while Harry answers Niall’s questions — even though he must himself know the answer — about appropriate winter feeding.

It stinks inside the shed, like it’s all too earthy to be even a proper, identifiable smell, but at least it’s warmer, and Nick loiters in the background, half listening to them and half running his fingers over some scratched graffiti on the wall that looks like Niall and Harry’s initials.

When they’re happy with the footage Harry collects the camera. “Get that edited tomorrow. Yous coming in for a drink?” Niall says.
“Since it’s Saturday,” Harry says, and takes Niall’s arm to help him across the icy floor.

The farmhouse has one of those kitchens Nick was sure only existed on TV before he moved here — a big, rectangular wooden table with a condiment tray permanently resting in the middle and benches that look like they were hewn directly out of the middle of ancient trees. There’s a hearth that takes up the vast majority of one wall and has copper pots and tankards in it as well as a basket of logs and several small brass animals, and the room’s still big enough for a couple of sofas which look like they’ve seen better days but which are the comfiest Nick’s ever sat in.

Warmth creeps in from every angle and he takes a beer Harry offers him from Niall’s selection.

“Jimmy down the lane makes it,” Niall says, “he got a little shed with a brewery in it, makes so much he can’t get through it. Keep telling him he needs to bring some in for the shop — get a nice label for them, could be a good little earner, that.”

Having put the camera back in its bag on the table and doled out the beer, Harry unwinds his scarf and sinks down next to Nick. He doesn’t leave much space and reaches for Nick’s hand, linking their fingers and resting them together on his thigh. Niall’s gaze goes to it, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Quite the empire you got,” Nick says. He takes a swig of the beer — it’s some kind of stout and tastes like Guinness with a whiskey in it — not unpleasantly.

“Stay afloat,” Niall says. After knocking back a handful of painkillers, he takes the armchair next to the fire and lifts his boot up onto a waiting footstool that probably used to be floral but has had most of the stuffing kicked out of it, so it looks like an eccentric pensioner with grey bits flying everywhere. He undoes the Velcro on the side of the boot with a serious of crunching rips, sighs in relief as he slides his foot out of it and wriggles his toes, wincing at the same time.

“How much longer you got to wear that?”

“Couple of weeks, they said.” Gingerly, Niall rests his foot on the stool, adjusting where his jeans have been rolled up to just below his knee. The pattern of the boot has sunk into his flesh and makes his sock look like an extended pattern has spilled off it and worked its way up using the hair on his legs as some kind of ladder. Bruises cluster around his ankle — purplish and greenish bleeding into outright black and the thick starting of a scar marks a jagged path halfway up his calf. “Be glad when I’m done with it.”

“Did mine playing football couple of years ago,” Nick says. “It swelled up like a bloody melon and —”

Harry looks up at him. “You didn’t tell me you play football.”

“I don’t,” Nick says, “that was how I ended up breaking a bone. Doctor just looked at me like I should’ve known better than to try and take up some exercise at my vastly advanced stage of life.”

Niall splutters a laugh into his bottle.

“It’s not funny,” Nick says, lifting his to his lips to hide his smile. “That was my best leg and therefore quite probably my best feature and it looked like an old Christmas ham for almost two months. We’re not going to even talk about some of the nonsense I said to people when I was off my face.”

“What drugs they give you?” Niall says.
“Began with a t. Made me feel like I was a spaceship. I remember trying to tell the nurse she needn’t bother getting me any crutches because I had no armpits to rest them in anyway. She just tutted and asked if there was a sensible adult who could come and get me.”

“Lady who strapped mine up, she was going on about how wet floors are slippery, and if I’d wanted to see her there were easier ways to go about it.”

“To be fair you were flirting with her quite a lot,” Harry says, and rests his head on Nick’s shoulder.

“I was not,” Niall says, voice pitching with indignation. “It was the pain talking.”

“Niall’s a dark horse,” Harry says, shifting to a better position, tucking himself into Nick’s side.

“Waste of a YouTube empire if he wasn’t,” Nick says. He gives it more genuine flirtation than he feels as he meets Niall’s eye. “Come to think of it you’re both annoying overachievers – Harry’s got the paper and the Bakery and —”

“Guess you’re right,” Niall says. “Call the eligible bachelor lists. Here, you find anything for your front page yet? Only if you want Mabel for a photograph I’ll get her a shampoo ‘forehand.”

Nick stops mid-way through the sip of beer he was taking. “The cow has a stylist now?”

“Not all the time,” Niall says, with a sly grin. “Only for press and appearances.”

Harry winds his arm around Nick’s to toy with his cuff. “We got something else,” he says. “We’re doing a big, like, reunion story.”

“Oh aye?” Niall lifts an eyebrow like he’s genuinely interested and Nick’s not sure why he’s surprised, because Niall seems to take a genuine interest in a lot of things.

“It’s a surprise so don’t tell anyone but we’re arranging for Mrs. W to get a visit from someone she hasn’t seen in, like, decades. We’re going to do them a really nice afternoon tea, like the ones they would’ve had together at —” he looks up at Nick. “— what’s that place you were talking about?”

“Cafe Royal.”

“Cafe Royal,” Harry says. Clearly he’s forgotten the bit about people putting acid in their eyeballs and Nick’s winning story about partially barfing up the cocktail du jour and mistaken it for the tea room at Claridges.

“Looking forward to reading that,” Niall says. “Cheers to you, Nicholas, for finding something.”

They while away an hour or so talking about various injuries they’ve all had over the years, the time Niall got his hand stuck in a tractor wheel trying to retrieve a tennis ball and gouged himself all the way down to the bone of his wrist, a story from their school where Harry got a concussion after someone kicked an impromptu football made of a stone wrapped in sellotape at his head, Nick’s longstanding anecdote about Ibiza A&E which he had to take himself to after spraining both his wrists falling over at a foam party in what his friends from back home still call The Wrist Breaking Rave Incident. Niall gestures to Harry’s empty bottle, cradled loosely in his lap.

“Another?”

Harry shakes his head. “M’driving.”

“Can stay here,” Niall says, “pair of you.”
Harry looks at Nick and Nick shrugs. “Fine with me, s’long as we get back early enough to give Pig her breakfast.”

It seems enough agreement for Niall to stagger to his feet, and he hops across the rug to retrieve another three bottles from the wooden crate on the other side of the hearth. He unscrews the caps on two of them and Nick leans in to take them, and the three of them set about sinking into drinking and a conversation about nothing in particular, where they weave a collective story about making videos and school time pranks and dinners that only ever existed on plastic trays in school canteens. Harry mostly listens, chipping in every now and then with a joke at Niall’s expense, and Niall’s decent company, talks fast and animated, each joke lurching into the next one. He asks questions — even when Nick’s saying something stupid for effect — and Nick’s just cracking into another story about the time he got suspended for telling a teacher they looked like Meatloaf when Niall lifts his finger to his lips.

Nick looks down; Harry’s asleep on his chest. He smiles down at him, rolling his eyes. “Someone’s tuckered out,” he says, quiet, but not so quiet that Harry wouldn’t stir if he’d only just nodded off.

The quiet that descends makes everything feel more intense — the weight of Harry draped across his body, Niall sitting watching them like this, the crackling of the fire. “How’d your fish pie work out?” Niall says.

“It didn’t,” Nick says. “Was a total disaster.”

“Oh, really?” Niall says, genuine surprise flashing across his face. Nick lifts an eyebrow in question. “He texted me, like, four times to say how great everything was going. I got a really nice picture of him grinning his head off in the mirror in your toilet if you want to see it.”

“He texted you from my bathroom?”

“Only ‘cos he was nervous.” Nick meets his eye and maybe he looks confused because Niall shrugs. “S’used to flirting with people, int’ he, not so much what happens when they like him back.”

Nick avoids Niall’s eyes, hot and embarrassed in his stomach. “Right.” He looks down at Harry, tucks a frizzy curl that’s escaped back behind his ear.

“You wanna wake him?” Niall says, voice low and eyes glinting in the dark. “Take him up to the spare room? I’ll just need to get you some pillows or something.”

“Nah, just — chuck us that blanket?” Nick makes a grabby hand at the throw on the other sofa.

Niall hands it over and lets Nick arrange it over Harry. “You be all right?”

Nick nods.

The stairs creak as Niall heaves himself up them and leaves them alone, Harry lightly snoring in the dark.

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“Oh fuck what time is —”

“Shh, shhh it’s fine, go back to sleep,” Nick says, stroking Harry’s hair and seeking out his eyes in the dark. He’s not even sure if he had been asleep but his heart’s still startled by the abrupt necessity to talk. “It’s Saturday — well Sunday now but you got nowhere to be but here.”

Harry closes his eyes again but it’s in relief, and he buries his face in Nick’s shoulder.

“All right?” Nick says.

“I had a — dream.”

“A scary one?” Nick says, and he’s not sure that’s the right word but Harry’s head shifts in a nod. “It’s over.” Nick squeezes him in, rearranging the blanket over Harry’s shoulder. “You’re all right, I’ve got you.”

He shifts on the sofa, Harry curling into a ball for him to enclose. “Promise?” he murmurs.

“I promise.”

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The next thing Nick knows is Harry snuffling against his neck, his hands fidgeting on Nick’s chest and the rest of him a squirmy weight that’s monopolised the sofa as effectively as a labrador might. The blanket’s scratchy against Nick’s throat as he moves and he bats at Harry’s head, trying to pat him back to sleep again, but Harry’s having none of it. He eases up Nick’s chest and nibbles at his stubble, murmuring, “’morning sexy,” like they’re not tangled together in his mate’s front room.

Reluctantly Nick forces one eyelid open, groaning to give Harry a hint that he’d really like a little bit more of a lie in. It’s still half dark. Outside somewhere there are birds clucking — they might be actual chickens and god if Harry’s woken him up before the rooster — and the low moan of a disgruntled cow. Nick swipes at his own forehead and tries to arrange the blanket, since it’s ridden up and so has his jumper, creating a not too pleasant draught around where his midriff’s exposed.

Harry reaches the corner of Nick’s mouth and catches Nick’s chin to turn him into a kiss. The breath situation definitely needs addressing; he’s all sour and warm and Nick’s just coming around to the idea of that not mattering when Harry shifts against his side and presses the unmistakable hard line of his dick to Nick’s hip. “Mmfph?” Nick says, which is about the best he can do in the circumstances, his brain trying to remember how to kiss and how to stay balanced on the edge of a sofa all at once and vaguely thinking he should ask if Harry’s ok about the dream thing.

“Mmmhhmmmm.”

Apparently when at Niall’s they only talk in m words.

Nick grabs a handful of velour for leverage and hauls himself into turning, trapping Harry between his body and the sagging sofa cushions. At his mouth, Harry murmurs approval for the change in position, his fingers scratching up into Nick’s hair. He lifts his hips and presses his erection against Nick’s leg this time, and Nick wants to say something funny like, yes, I felt it the first time, but
Harry’s kissing him so urgent and focused, the words get swallowed up between them.

And this is all Nick wanted, to know he was wanted, even though he’s such a fucking mess.

He skims Harry’s side with his palm, roaming over the curve of his ribs and down towards the thick denim waistband of his jeans and the ribbed elastic underneath that’s just poking out. “Mm,” Harry says, guttural, and when Nick goes to retreat to his ribs, Harry catches his fingers. He slots their hands together for a moment but his kiss says he’s not in the mood for stopping. He steers Nick’s hand down between them to where he’s straining against his zip, looking up at him with his mouth open and his pupils blown. “M’okay?”


In truth, he should probably be thinking a lot of things, like what if Niall comes down and finds him wanking his best mate off under what could well be a family heirloom of a throw, but he runs his thumb down the bulge in Harry’s jeans, feeling the contours of the swell beneath. He doesn’t think he’ll ever quite get over it, the way he can make another guy twitch, and he presses his tongue against Harry’s to make the point about how very okay it is, cups him so Harry rocks against his palm. He leaves his fingers there in the rough warmth between Harry’s legs until Harry curls his fingers in Nick’s hair, sucking on his lip and letting out a moan of encouragement and frustration.

Slowly, he undoes the button, letting the zip slide down as he slips his hand inside.

Harry holds his breath as Nick wraps his fingers around the length of him, nudges his nose with his as he starts to move his hand. It takes a moment but Harry finally breathes out shakily, eyes rolling back underneath his closing eyelids.

Nick kisses his cheekbone, then has to focus on the tiny darker patch on his lip and the red bump that might become a spot in a few days on his nose — and he’s not sure why it feels like such a lot but it does, and he just holds on until Harry comes, swearing and gasping against his mouth.

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They take the long way back, Harry twining his fingers with Nick’s on the armrest between them whenever he gets more than a few metres of clear road. Nick’s inner Catholic winces at the church bells, and because no one’s said anything in ages, he says, “Think you can drop me off? Got a few things I need to go and confess.”

Harry glances across with a smirk before pressing his lips together and focusing back on the road. “You go to church?” he says.

“Only at Christmas. Take my elderly relatives to mass, pretend I can remember who all the saints are, dodge the vicar before he tries to get a big donation out of me.”

“Right,” Harry says, and he smiles like it’s been some massive revelation.

When they get back, Pig’s tail’s going like a helicopter blade even though it’s not that much later than Nick would usually get up. He herds her back towards the kitchen, tips some fresh food into a bowl for her, and before he’s even really finished setting it down, Harry’s all over him.

He lets Harry back him up against the sink and kiss him like he wants to, which apparently is with a
lot of tongue and enthusiasm and his hands under the hem of his jumper. Harry pulls back after a
moment, his eyes closed and his lips shiny. “You want to go for a jog or something?” he says. He
slurs the words together and digs his fingers into the flesh on Nick’s hips and if he doesn’t stop
Nick’s probably going to forget everything he thought about what Niall said, all the sensible
resolutions he made about letting Harry take things at his own pace until he gets used to things.

“Probably should, shouldn’t we.”

“Then —” Harry shifts closer. “— you like Sunday lunch, right?” He looks up to meet Nick’s eye.
“Just — mum’s cooking, my sister’s back, I think she brought her boyfriend and I —” He stalls,
frowning slightly. “— we don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to? Love a roast, me.”

“Really?”

“ ‘Course,” Nick says, then hesitates. “They do know about me, right? I mean I know your mum
saw —”

“I tell ‘em everything.” Nick boggles. “PG version of everything.” Harry gives him a noisy kiss on
the mouth. “Come on,” he says. “I left some trainers here somewhere didn’t I?”

Rolling his eyes Nick follows him. Apparently it’s jogging now not jogging after a lengthy snog,
which probably means he’ll be required to do some actual running and not what he sometimes used
to do with his friends when they insisted he get some exercise, which was go to the park wearing
joggers and tackle half the perimeter before getting an ice cream and having a fag. He digs Harry’s
absurd yellow trainers out of the bottom of the cupboard where they’re all tangled up together with
Nick’s, pulls on some hoodie which he nicked from Rita Ora’s sportswear launch but which he’s
never actually used for its intended purpose before.

“Race?” Harry says, and Nick’s not sure that’s the best idea but pretty sure he can’t get out of it, so
he grabs his inhaler and pushes Harry out of the way so at least he’ll be first to the front door.

The air is so cold it burns his face and the inside of his throat and the ground has hardened into the
unploughable kind that winter demands. They’re barely through the first field when Nick’s legs start
protesting, but he pushes through it, finds a rhythm that makes it bearable at least, and Pig’s having
the time of her life racing both of them and winning, even though she gets frequently distracted by a
bird she’s startled up out of the hedgerow. They take a circuit through the fields that have become
familiar to him from all the mornings Harry dragged him out and he finds himself wondering what
it’s like here when the earth is churned up ready for planting, when it’s fresh with recently sprouted
shoots or when there’s corn waist-height and swaying in golden sunlight. If that’s even what they
grow here. He’s imagining it must be something that lends itself to his bucolic fantasy but he
supposes it could be something unglamorous like turnips or that nothing will be planted here at all,
that it’s been set aside under some scheme from the government or otherwise left abandoned and
empty.

He can’t imagine what it’s like here when it’s hot. He pictures ice cream shops with quaint little tubs
and real cones that stick to your lip when you’re trying to eat them, the kind of place that does rum
and raisin and maybe has an unusual specialty like cinder toffee and salt. Maybe it’s Niall, maybe he
has one of those tricycles with a parasol or a tray to sell choc ices out of with straps that go over his
shoulder, like an usherette at a cinema from the forties. He stumbles on a divot and Harry turns round
to look, jogging backwards. “You all right?”

“Just — thinking about choc ices,” Nick puffs, and Harry must be getting used to him, because he
just turns around again and beckons Pig on to try and keep up when he goes faster.

By the time they get back, it’s debatable who’s in most need of a shower — they’re all splattered up to at least the knees in mud and Harry even has some kind of leaf matter in his hair. Nick picks it out thinking it’ll be romantic, but it’s wet and sticks to him and he ends up trying to shake it off over the sink. “I need a shower,” he says.

“ ‘M I invited?’

“I got more than one bathroom,” Nick says, for show, because the way Harry’s looking at him, all hooded and suggestive, is not something he’s interested in trying to pretend he’s not interested in.

“What about conserving water, though.”

“Valid point.” Nick collects his hand, pinching his lips together as he leads Harry up the stairs. He skips the en suite and instead opts for what the listing probably described as the family bathroom. The ceiling’s sloped underneath the beams, like the whole thing’s been arranged specifically to point at the claw footed bath in front of the window. From there, the view just sort of sprawls out with no humanity to be witnessed — it’s just endless grass and sky and hills peppered with the last browned leaves of autumn, and maybe a dragon sleeping underneath it all. The other half of the room is all shower, the tiles that mark out the space where the tray should be just carrying on up the wall until a huge rain head like a sunflower pokes out from the rafters. Nick’s wanted to try it out since he arrived, but every time he came in here, he felt oddly self-conscious about being naked in such an open room and bottled it. When he looks at Harry, he’s half way into a smile, meets Nick’s gaze.

Nick undoes the fastenings on his jogging bottoms and pushes them down his legs to step out of them, peels off his t-shirt and turns the shower on, trying to act as if his heart’s not thunking away twice as fast as it was at any point during his recent attempt at cardio. Harry slides in behind him, fitting his chest to Nick’s back, having achieved the kind of stealth nudity that Nick often longed for when he got caught up in a stray sock or other embarrassing sex prelude fail. He ducks under the water even though it’s not quite up to temperature yet, shuddering at the way it hits his heated skin, and doesn’t turn around when Harry mouths at his shoulder, just lets the water keep falling and Harry do whatever he wants until he’s spilling in a pool of it caught in Harry’s hand.

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The sky’s dusky when they leave for lunch and even though they’ve missed the busiest time the pub’s still full. There are various bottles with candles in on each table and pots of cranberry sauce and horseradish jostle for position with tiny little gravy jugs and matching salt and pepper pots, the combined smell of roast beef and apple sauce making Nick’s stomach growl. With the crackling of the fire and the chalkboard sign advertising mulled wine, for the first time, he feels like it’s actually winter.

Harry waves to Anne behind the bar and clears a table of plates while he’s passing, doing that thing waiters do where they somehow manage to balance them all the way up their forearms.

“I can’t even carry one without breaking it,” he says, and Harry smiles while Nick gets the hatch for him so he can take them straight through to the kitchen.
The sink’s all but buried under pots and pans and plates, and two guys in white hats and checked aprons are red in the face and sweating profusely over a series of Yorkshire puddings. Harry drops the plates off and goes back out to the bar, asks a guy with a hook nose and tiny square glasses if he’s having his usual and sets about making a gin and tonic and pouring half a Guinness.

Nick loiters, not quite sure where he fits in all this, whether he’s a punter or staff, but Anne hands him a stack of bowls which have recently had some kind of sticky pudding and custard in. “Be a love,” she says, and shoos him back towards the kitchen. After he’s done that lot, he takes his coat and scarf off and goes back out, stacking plates on the tables and crawling on the carpet like a scavenger for cutlery that’s been dropped by bored five year olds.

Eventually everyone who wants something to eat is seated and Anne wipes the chalkboard menu off with her sleeve and scrawls the words ‘SOLD OUT’ and a happy face. Out the back, Harry loads the dishwasher using some scheme of plate stacking which would give Nick’s mum hives and sets it off, puffs of steam from it shooting out the sides of the door.

When they finally make it up to the flat Nick’s feet are aching — if he’d known he’d be doing any back and forth he definitely would’ve made alternate footwear choices, especially after the morning’s various exertions — and in the lounge where there’s normally nothing much there’s now a table set for four and a girl with lilac hair. Harry throws himself at her for a hug, swaying them both from side to side and practically lifting her off her feet. When he finally lets her go, he rolls his eyes like he’s embarrassed and says, “Gem this is Nick.”

She puts her hands on her hips and looks Nick up and down. “Hi.”

Nick holds his hand out. “Nice to meet you.” It feels absurdly formal but she shakes it like they’ve just done a business deal for a massive stock sale. He looks around. “Was expecting a boyfriend.”

“Nope,” she says, and the smile she was throwing him turns a little gritted. “Just me.”

Nick hadn’t realised it, but he’d sort of been clinging to the idea of a boyfriend for Anne and Harry to meet as a shield. In its absence, he feels like he’s got too many hands and that every single thing he’s done with Harry — especially the recent shower stuff — is written all over his face in particularly accusatory wrinkles. “You need a hand or anything?” he says, gesturing to the kitchen, where the oven’s whirring away and each of the burners on the stove has something bubbling away on top of it.

“We need wine.”

“Think I can about arrange that in a pub,” Nick says.

With Anne’s permission, he goes and nicks a bottle of red and another of white from the cellar, and when he comes back, Anne’s on the sofa with her feet in a bowl of hot water and Gemma and Harry are huddled over the counter with their heads and hands together.

“Typical guy, right? Total arsehole.”

“Yeah but if you —”

Gemma glances up at Nick and says, “Forget it.” She fixes a smile and takes the red. “Thanks. Get this open, shall I?”

There must be some kind of cooking gene, because Gemma has single-handedly made a roast that
any Oxo mum would be proud of. They sit around the tiny table, Nick bumping elbows with Harry and barely enough room for all the dishes and definitely not enough for the Yorkshire puddings. “How d’you get these so big?” Nick says. “Could wear one as a hat.”

“Got a recipe off the internet,” Gemma says, and swaps her carrots for Harry’s cabbage.

Nick helps himself to a roast potato and tries to remember how he normally sits in front of people, reassuring himself that yes his legs are doing broadly speaking what they usually do and telling himself that no one really cares whether or not he puts his elbows on the table.

“Harry says you’re writing a book,” Gemma says, her wine glass dangling from her fingers. Her tone is aiming for interested but it’s the kind of piercing interested that someone who’s decided they don’t like your shoes might use in a job interview.

Swallowing a mouthful of red wine, Nick nods. “Almost finished,” he says, “which my agent will be pleased to hear — she’s getting right bored of texting me to see how it’s going.”

“You’ve got an agent already?” Gemma says. “Impressive.” She lifts an eyebrow like it’s the opposite and Nick tries to tell himself that her eyebrows are not some kind of judge and jury.

“What’s it about, then?”

Harry looks at him and Nick damn her for getting all the curiosity genes as well as the cooking ones.

“This and that,” Nick says, waving with his fork. “It’s kind of based on my life, like a sort of comedy? Mostly of errors.” Harry grins like he’s said something incredibly witty, which is gratifying. “Or it’s supposed to be. I don’t know if it’s actually funny. Hard to tell isn’t it when you know how everything ends and there aren’t any surprises.”

“Gemma writes as well,” Anne says.

“Mum, I — ”

“You should show him later — that one you did about losing your phone was brilliant.”

“It was just a… thing.”

Anne does a mild impression of Gemma’s face as she reaches for the mustard. “It was a good thing.”

“It was rushed, the last paragraph was a mess.”

“Well I didn’t think so,” Anne says. “I thought it was perfect.”

Gemma rolls her eyes and goes back to her wine and Nick’s not sure whose side he’s supposed to take, here. “You never get in on the Argus?” he says, thinking a change of subject might help.

Gemma bristles.

“Er,” Harry says. “No.” It feels like a general sort of no, as if Nick might’ve casually sauntered into a minefield, and he looks to Harry making a sort of help face. “Gemma volunteered — she wrote something really great about hedgerow endangerment but Pat — ”

“The one who won the lottery and went to Barbados?”

Harry nods, chewing on a roast potato. He swallows. “She had a very specific idea of what should go in there.”
“She said my writing was too depressing,” Gemma says, with a disapproving waggle of her head. “She offered me the puzzle section. It’s not even a section. It’s half a page.”

“Oh.”

“And then when she left,” Gemma says, “she handed it all over to someone with literally no experience.”

Harry shifts on his seat.

“Worked out all right though, in the end?” Nick says, looking hopefully about the table. “Now you get to write about losing your phone. That’s… sick?”

The look Gemma shoots him falls just short of withering and Nick downs half a glass of wine and decides to just keep quiet for a while and let her think him an idiot instead of opening his gob and proving her right.

Anne and Gemma chat about Gemma’s job and her flat and someone they all know who’s getting married and she asks Harry about his exams and how he’s revising, if the timetable template she sent him is helping at all. Harry shifts on his seat again and says it’s fine, that he’s been really busy with the paper but he’ll get to it, and Gemma frowns at him but doesn’t push it.

Nick helps tidy away and do the washing up, which he likes to think he gets some points for, and when Anne and Gemma settle down to watch a rerun of Bake Off Nick says he’ll just nip outside for a cigarette. Gemma makes a comment about lung cancer and he says he’s trying to cut down, he really is, and makes a swift exit.

He’s not expecting Harry to grab his coat and follow him out but he does, and they both nip through the kitchen — which is slowly turning its way out of disaster and back to normality — to the beer garden. The heater’s not on and Harry thumps the switch with his palm, peering at it until the bar inside it glows orange.

They loiter right underneath it, stamping their feet on the aged concrete, Nick cupping his hand around his lighter and inhaling. He hates himself for it, but it does make him feel instantly better. He stares out over the back wall and into the abundant darkness, wondering if he should explain that normally he does a lot better with families and he’s not sure quite where he went wrong here. “You never said, about your exams,” Nick says. “They soon?”

Harry shrugs.

“What’s that mean?”

“They’re — it’s fine.” He reaches for Nick, dragging him in with the pockets of his coat. “Shall we go soon?”

“Go?”

“Back to yours.”

Nick turns his head to avoid blowing smoke in his face. “Don’t you want to — I don’t know — play Trivial Pursuit or whatever it is normal people do on Sundays with their family?”

“Mum’ll be back on the bar in a bit,” he says.

“What about Gemma?”
“See her at Christmas, won’t I?” Harry moves in closer, like he’s trying to win Nick over, peering up at him and toying with his lapel. With the backdrop of nothing but hills and a splattering of pinprick stars and the soft chatter from the pub, it makes Nick feel like he’s in a Sunday night drama, a character who drama dictates needs to have the whole thing come crashing about his knees before the end credits.

“What happened with her boyfriend anyway?” Nick says.

“One of her friends saw him on Tinder and when she asked him about it he called her immature for being jealous.”

“Oh.” Nick takes another drag on his cigarette. “That’s quite a modern problem.”

“And you wondered why I didn’t want to get into all that.” Harry leans in, pushing up on his toes, and nibbles Nick’s ear. “My way is much more straightforward.”

It stings a bit in the cold, the way Harry’s breath encloses his lobe all hot and wet and sudden, but Nick’s always had a bit of a thing for ear stuff if he’s honest, his guts freewheeling and acquiescing to Harry before his brain’s even really caught up. He catches the side of Harry’s face and brings him in, kissing the side of his mouth. “Yeah,” Nick says. “But if she needs you —”

“She’ll only start a fight with me.” He works his hand up under Nick’s jumper and scratches lightly over Nick’s ribs. Makes him go a bit funny, if Nick’s honest. “Be better if she sulks and eats her own weight in ice cream.”

“Fine, then,” Nick says, throwing his arm around Harry’s shoulder as he grinds his cigarette out on the wall, “we can go and say bye and maybe when we get home I’ll let you make some kind of pudding.”

Harry grins like he’s actually won something. “That flan for Florence needs a tester,” he says.

“Was that the thing with all the custard? I’m going to need another jog to work that off.”

“Or other activity which raises your heart rate,” Harry says, adding a suggestive eyebrow, “and that can probably be arranged.”
Postcards from the Edge

On my way in to do my first proper night time show, I ran into Annie Nightingale in the corridor and she mistook me for a famous Belgian techno producer. I was so in awe of her I didn’t want to correct her, so I did a pan-European accent and told her an egregious lie about working on a new track with Diplo. She tried to cover how much the idea horrified her and gave me her email address so I could send it when it was finished.

I didn’t know what to do when the next week rolled around, so I went in early just to hide from her in the studio. But doing that every week for the rest of forever seemed infeasible and I started to panic about seeing her elsewhere, too, so the next week I got a severe haircut and came in wearing an entirely different style of clothes and my glasses and introduced myself as if we’d never met.

I don’t know if she twigged they were both me or if she’s still waiting on that track.

Nick taps his biro on the edge of his notebook. Sometimes he misses it, the routine of radio, even if it mostly belonged to other people — farmers and feeding mothers and even bakers who’d text in — those who were awake when no one around them was gave his life rhythm. Their lives gave shape to his day and his week and his entire year; it’s hard to remember these days which day is which, especially when the last couple have involved the same things, Harry and hand jobs and falling asleep at odd times of the day only to wake up disconcerted and start all over again.

Nick’s phone buzzes on the table. He lets the biro fall onto the pad and looks to see who it is.

Hey you busy?

He presses to reply. Not especially why?

Can you do me a favour? Mrs Whitstable wants to check some details in her will only she can’t remember the name of her solicitor.

Nick watches the typing dots carry on blinking and somewhere between them he sees Harry gently whispering that it’s morning and he has to go, kissing him goodbye in the harsh light of dawn. It feels simultaneously like it happened a few seconds ago and as if it’s happened for most of forever.

She says there’s a paper copy under her bed in a hat box?

Can you go and get it? When I said I couldn’t go today she got quite upset.

Sure, Nick types. He’s got nothing better planned and the anecdotes he was half-heartedly listing might seem to have more life in them if he takes them out for a bit of fresh air.

I’ve got her keys, you can pick them up on the way and I’ll print you out a map x

Oh and take the muffins xox

Nick drives to the surgery with the tin of muffins on the passenger seat, chattering to Pig in case she notices where they’re going and has some kind of flashback. If she recognises the pattern of fields and the hedge outside and the wonky cattery sign though it doesn’t really show on her face. “Stay here, I’ll just be a minute,” he says, and hops out of the car.
It’s bitterly windy and the force of it knocks him almost sideways, so by the time he makes the dash around the side of the building to reception, he’s actually shivering inside what is, admittedly, an inadequately thin sweater.

Harry looks over from the desk at the tinkle of the bell. He breaks into a smile that provokes some kind of riot in Nick’s chest, but he’s got a patient with a cat in a basket on the tinsel-trimmed desk so Nick hovers by the stand of flyers about fleas and the importance of microchipping and waits his turn.

“If you want to take a seat Mrs Hussain, we’re running just a little bit behind,” Harry says, and he wiggles his fingers through the bars of the cat basket, even though the ball of fluff inside is scowling at him with angry yellow eyes. The cat hisses and Harry retracts his fingers but not the placid expression he’s wearing. “Someone’s having a bad day, aren’t they?”

He beckons Nick over, leans across the desk to plant a kiss on Nick’s mouth in greeting. He’s wearing reindeer antlers and a Fair Isle cardigan over his uniform top and it shouldn’t be endearing but somehow it is, along with the biro he’s got in his top pocket and the curl of hair just under his ear. “Thanks so much for this,” he says. He shows Nick the map — he’s highlighted the route in neon pink just in case Nick’s sat nav isn’t up to it — and he hands over the keys and explains which door Nick needs to go in and that he has to make sure the other one stays bolted.

“And it’s under the bed, you say?”

Harry nods. “Give me a call if you can’t find it.”

He comes out to wave Nick off, makes a special effort to wave at Pig too, before he gets distracted by the arrival of an ancient Toyota with some kind of wolfhound on the passenger seat.

In the rear-view Nick just gets a glimpse of the wolfhound exuberantly exiting the Toyota, trailing its lead and owner after it. It makes a beeline for Harry, leaps at him, and lands its paws on Harry’s shoulders with such force Harry and it topple backwards and are consumed by the wisteria.

Nick laughs most of the way to the signpost and the ploughing contest advert, then intermittently for the next twenty-eight miles.

Mrs Whitstable’s house sits stout on its own lot, but it’s hardly the kind of thing Nick would coo over if he saw it on Air BnB. The windows are criss-crossed with sellotape to hold them together and beyond, there’s flowered curtains in orange straight out of the seventies, and the door’s guarded by a large hydrangea with mop-heads of brown, dried flowers. Nick pulls up outside, and miraculously Pig waits for him to open the door rather than nutting at the window to get out. He folds her lead up in his palm and they trot through the front garden with her stopping to sniff the lawn and an old crisp packet that’s apparently fascinating while Nick tries to work out how to get around the back when everything is so overgrown.

He edges past the hydrangea and finds an old lean-to on the side with a corrugated plastic roof, where old rusted up garden tools have apparently come to die. He picks his way through broken tiles and chunks of concrete, and tucked behind it is a yellow door with peeling paint and glass with a pattern of frosted circles. Nick tries the key and it slides in like they’re old friends slotting back into a
routine. “Come on Pig,” he says.

They step up into a small kitchen with a rickety white gas stove and a beast of a washing machine — one of those ones you load from the top and then haul sopping knitwear out of with your sleeves rolled up. In the window, a string of onions is drying and underneath there’s a small Formica table and chairs and the last dozen or so editions of The Slaughter Regional Argus. The whole place smells like crumbs and lard and Nick winds Pig’s lead tighter in his palm.

The next room’s not really a room at all, doors at both ends so it’s more of a walk-through. All the overstuffed chairs are arranged around the gas fire rather than the television, which is ancient, and has one of those orange knobbly lamps and the same kind of glass animals Nick’s seen in antique shops on top of it, each one with their own crochet doily to sit on. There’s loose change and dust collecting in a trinket dish and a picture of a kid in school uniform squinting at the camera in a cheap gold frame. Off the hall through the door there’s a curtained cubby. Nick whacks the light switch next to it so he can see his way up the tight, vibrantly paisley stairs.

He locates the right bedroom easily enough since there’s only two to choose from and one is full of posters for Man U. He grasps Pig’s lead between his teeth as he gets on his hands and knees to peer underneath the bed, lifting the eiderdown.

“A hat box, he said, look at this.”

Pig’s more interested in sniffing around the wardrobe, so Nick lets her go, gets his phone out and switches on the torch to better identify which one of the dozen or so boxes — any one of which you might feasibly get a hat or at least a fascinator in — is the one he needs. There’s a whole warren of dust bunnies under there so he starts with the biggest box he can reach, dragging it out and lifting the lid off. There’s an actual hat in it — or at least a great deal of ostrich feathers pretending to be one — so he slides it onto his head, takes a picture, and reaches for the next. He turfs up old tap shoes, a Chanel handbag Alexa would actually die for, and a box of postcards apparently all sent from someone with atrocious hand writing. Eventually he gets to a large shoebox that rattles and has the word ‘important’ scrawled on the front in unmistakable old lady script. The lid’s been rudimentally taped shut but with a bit of persuasion from his fingernail Nick gets it free.

Inside, there are three fat envelopes, each one ripped open so the tops are jagged, a strip of shiny browned glue and spit partially revealed. He peers into the first one — it’s a letter confirming the mortgage has been paid off, kept more for necessity than sentiment Nick suspects. The second, though, starts:

Dear Mrs J Whitstable,

We are delighted to have been engaged to act on your behalf in this matter. Please find enclosed your copy of the last will and testament to be signed and witnessed as arranged in our meeting.

“Bingo.”

Nick flips through several pages of stapled-together A4 to make sure he’s got all the bits and puts them on the bedspread. He lifts the third envelope to see if it’s anything to do with it. It turns out to just be a TV license but underneath is a bed of newspaper clippings.

They’re yellowed with age, the pictures more a series of dots than picture, captions telling tales of Florence Dudley and friend Joan Bankridge while they shop, dine at venues some of which Nick recognises, are pictured at the opening of a play or film or just getting into a car. Some of the bigger pieces are folded and carefully Nick opens them up, reads about Florence, who is always smiling, and Joan, who often is not. The tone of the words crawls over his skin — Florence flaunting a new
coat, sporting a jewel that was supposedly a gift from a secret lover details of which were whispered into the journalist’s ear by person unseen and unnamed, Joan making a bid for stardom and rumours of a part in a film with Michael Caine who thinks her very striking.

Breathing heavily, Nick puts them in a pile.

He hasn’t really thought about it lately — any of this — but the back of his neck prickle. This is what it looks like, a life in clippings in a shoebox.

He puts the hat he’s been wearing back and notices the postcards again. He flips a couple over, picking out the odd line here and there — *Cannes is marvellous darling, thinking of you, Flo x* — *the apples in the Big Apple are no bigger than the ones in England, quelle disappointmente, F xx — I saw a man today who was the spit of your father, he’s not in Milan by any chance? FJD*

The mixture of thoughtful and shallow sits uncomfortably in Nick’s chest and the longer he stares at them, the more he realises it’s because they’re just a bit too similar to messages he’s sent. He pulls another one towards him, the handwriting calling to him for being a fair bit bolder and messier than the rest, and when he flips it over to see where it’s from, the vividness of the picture whacks him right in the chest.

He checks the postmark but he’s not seeing things.

It says 2012.

Nick locks the door behind him and picks his way back through the lean to, envelope from the solicitor and box of postcards tucked under his arm and Pig trailing happily after him. In the car, he goes to put an old Ibiza compilation on his phone — and there sits a text from Harry asking if he found everything all right.

He wonders how to explain he found the house and the thing he came looking for, but everything is very far from all right, because maths was never his forte but even he can see a postcard from 2012 and Joan having not heard from Florence in fifty years really doesn’t compute.

“Why would she lie about that?”

Pig doesn’t know.

“For sympathy?”

Pig still doesn’t know.

“What am I going to tell him? And what about his front page? Ruins it doesn’t it if you knock a nought off the big reunion?”

Pig doesn’t know that, either. Nick should probably stop asking her questions. He starts the engine and lets the sat nav and Harry’s map be in charge for a while.

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The home looks imposing rather than stately under a forlorn, grey sky. Nick hugs the muffin tin to his chest, unable to shake the idea he’s being watched or followed, even though the only other people in the carpark are a woman pushing another with a generationally-similar face in a wheelchair.

The guy on reception flashes Nick a wide-eyed smile of recognition and there’s a clatter behind him where someone has just dropped an entire box of gold and brown baubles. “Oops,” Nick says and the guy just stares at him so Nick adds, “visitor for Mrs Whitstable?”

“Oh. Right,” the guy says. He looks like he’s been recently smacked in the face by a cold kebab. A bauble rolls out from behind the desk and he darts a glance at it, tries to stop it with his foot, misses, then pretends it’s just not happening. “She did say to expect someone, I just — I didn’t know it was you. Like, now. That you’d be here now.”

“Harry had to get busy with a wolfhound.”

The guy’s entire face crinkles with confused concentration, like he’s just been handed algebra and told the life of several hamsters depends upon him doing it successfully. “Shall I just..?” Nick takes the pen to sign in and turns the guest log around so he can scrawl his name and the time in it.

“Er — is it ok if I —” The guy leans across the desk, eyes dark and big like a cartoon bear. “— see, I sing. Just — in the pub and stuff — and I know you’re not doing it no more but she — Mrs Whitstable — she said maybe if I asked, you might put a word in for me with Simon?”

Nick hesitates, a joke about how she’s on a lot of painkillers and he has one of those faces that’s easy to mistake for other people’s fat on his tongue. But he signed in — it’s right there on the sheet in front of them, Nick Grimshaw — and the guy’s eyes — Nick has always been a sucker for a cartoon bear eye. “Sure,” he says. “Course I will.”

“Aww man that’s — can I give you my Twitter? There’s a link to my YouTube and —” The guy upends a folder on the desk, shoving aside a string of off-gold tinsel so it slithers onto the floor. “Aw crap I had one — I had a pen somew— ”

Nick hands him the one he was just using to sign in and the guy fumbles it between his hands. “God, this is —” He’s trembling as he writes his details down and thrusts a torn envelope at Nick. “Thank you — thank you so much.”

“No problem,” Nick says, “good luck with your audition if you decide to do one. Do the Spice Girls or something — something no one’s expecting.”

He gives the guy a quick smile and tugs Pig down the hall, stuffing the scrap of paper into his pocket and hoping he stops shaking by the time he gets to the room.

The Blackbird Suite smells redolently of cabbage today, and Nick taps on the doorframe, waiting for a hello before he sticks his head in. “You decent?” he says. On the drive over he wasn’t at all sure how he was going to play this but apparently, he’s decided to open with generically chipper. “Harry sent me ‘cos he’s at work. Try and keep the disappointment off your face, I’m feeling fragile.”

Mrs Whitstable beckons him in, pink on her cheeks, which means she’s either feeling better or she’s at least feeling good enough for vanity to propel her towards the blusher and a mirror.

“He made you these,” Nick says, and awkwardly dips down to slide the muffin tin onto the nightstand, wrinkling up a cheap magazine and nudging a box of tissues close to the edge. He takes
the chair next to the bed, nestles the old box and the envelope in his lap. “How are you, then?”

“Better when I can get that sorted,” she says, tapping a wizened knuckle on the bedspread, eyes on the envelope like she can read the letter through. There’s a ring trapped between the knuckle and her hand, not a wedding band, wrong finger, but a solid square emerald surrounded by little diamonds. If it’s real, it’s an impressive statement; she wasn’t wearing it the other day and somehow it makes her seem much less frail. “Here’s some advice for you — don’t get old. Horrible it is when you can’t remember.”

“Brought you these and all. Might jog things.” Nick sets the box of postcards on the bed, looking from it to her for a reaction. He thinks he sees one just catch the corner of her lip in a flinch, but soon as it’s there, she pushes it behind a mask of indifference. “What people do innit, when they’re not feeling well. Flip through old memories and pretend they’re sentimental. Not that it’s really possible to get properly nostalgic about 2012.”

He expects her to play innocent or at the very least tired and old and confused, but she looks at him directly, and her eyes are hard and endless, like staring at a picture of a galaxy in a science museum. “Harry said you had a cynical streak and a nose for a story.”

“He don’t know the half of it,” he mutters. Mrs Whitstable eyes him, questioning, and Nick shifts on his seat. “Let’s not beat around the whatsit. You didn’t actually lose touch with her, did you, Florence. Or not when you said you did. One of them postcards is from the Olympics and there’s another one — no date on it I could read but I’m pretty certain Starbucks didn’t exist in the sixties. Why’d you tell Harry you had? If you wanted his sympathy, you already had it, he’s practically a fucking saint.”

Mrs Whitstable looks at the window, not at the view, but at the glass. At herself, maybe, and Nick must be a cynic because it flashes through his head that she’s checking her angles and stealing herself for a scene. “Sometimes there’s a reason things are in a shoebox,” she says.

It’s an impressive delivery, given she improvised it, but Nick can throw a line out too. He glances pointedly at the photo in the gilt frame where it’s poking up behind a box of latex gloves. “And sometimes there’s a reason they’ve been on top of the telly for years. Let’s have it.”

Mrs Whitstable rearranges the blanket over her thighs, tugging at a thread that wasn’t even loose before she started pulling on it, wrinkling up the fabric in a little puckered skirt underneath her finger.

Nick’s gran — she used to say to remember things, you wind a bit of string or wool or whatever around your finger. When she died, on the day of the funeral, he panicked that he’d already started to lose the details of her, did just that with a length of cotton pinched from where a button on his suit was becoming detached. He tied it on so tight he almost bisected his knuckle with it, and he supposes that’s proof it works, because it’s like he’s back there in his bedroom nearly crying and winding it tighter and tighter and tighter, a swell in his stomach of not knowing what to do without her, with the loose button, with the feeling he was about to be engulfed, with any of it.

“You have any regrets, Nicholas?”

Nick pushes his glasses up his nose. “Oh, plenty. I’ve had some seriously dodgy highlights and one time I accidentally snorted washing powder, which I absolutely a hundred percent do not recommend, even if it did leave my nasal cavity gleaming and stain-free afterwards just like it promised on the advert.”

Mrs Whitstable stares at him in a way that’s disconcertingly redolent of Harry, like she’s trying to draw honesty out of him like one of those things from Harry Potter that feasts on souls. Maybe it
wouldn’t work so well if he hadn’t spent weeks staring at himself in the form of a Word document, if he hadn’t been cataloguing his failings and seeing the ghosts of relationships past appear every time he really thought about Harry, if it all didn’t keep whispering to him about how it would all disappear.


“Imagine they all looked like the same person.”

Nick stops breathing.

“Imagine you wished they’d stay in a box under the bed and at the same time you still wanted to look at them every wretched day.”

She spits out *wretched* and it’s like all the little cells that are usually busy repairing his liver and stitching things into his brain have been brought to an abrupt halt. He’s been here before, sort of — interviewing kids who were carers unable to let themselves be crushed under the weight of unjust responsibility or people afflicted with something terminal which should’ve ground the grit out of them but didn’t. He’s never been very good with people who can be stoic or people who give you a glimpse of their emotional suffering, and he’s totally useless when confronted with the combination of both.

“Imagine they kept writing — for years they kept writing, dangling hope — and then one day, just as you were almost ready — they stopped.”

Nick stares at the thread wound around her finger. He thinks of his nana and Florence and Joan as if they’ve somehow just become the same person, which he knows is ridiculous. “You didn’t write to her? Did you not know where to send stuff or —”

“I knew, of course I knew — but I’d’ve said what, eh?” Mrs Whitstable says, emphatic, her accent coming out more than it ever has before. “She hardly wanted to hear about the drudgery of my life.”

“You don’t know that. She might’ve.”

She sweeps at the box with the postcards in. “You read them. What fascination could the ordinary hold for someone who lives the way she does?”

Nick’s heart’s very heavy in his chest all of a sudden, like nothing exists but it and stuff whooshing in and out of it which isn’t usually there.

“Anyway, what’s it matter. Water under the bridge.” She gives the box of postcards a shove. “Be fine so long as it stays there.”

Nick presses his lips together.

Fuck.

He pictures Harry’s face — Harry, who’s been texting him non-stop about recipes and making him try them — trying to work out how he’ll feel when Nick tells him. He sees the story they’ve been planning fade out, the deadline for the printers pass, and everything Harry’s worked on for the last month get drag and dropped into the trashcan on his desktop. And the thing about Harry is, he believes in happy stories where Nick never, ever has, and how’s Nick supposed to take that away from him? He doesn’t have it in him to tell Harry his dear old substitute granny lied to him, let alone that she’s spent decades avoiding her feelings for someone they’ve arranged to have waltz back into her life when she’s like this, that the thing they thought was a nice idea is a gutting final chapter.
twist.

Maybe he could just call Florence and tell her the whole thing’s off. Miraculous recovery. Mistaken identity. Or something. He needs to find a way out of this.

Nick breathes out, rubs his chin. “I think we’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“Only a bit of one? What a novelty.”

“If I call the desk will they bring us a whiskey?”

“I wish.”

Nick reaches for the phone anyway. “Maybe we can make do with some tea and one of your painkillers, then. Hi — it’s Nick with Mrs Whitstable,” he says; it’s the guy with the bear eyes. “Just wondering if we can get a brew?”

When he hangs up, Nick does the only thing he can think of.

He tells Mrs Whitstable everything.

“So that’s the short version,” Nick says, when he’s finished going through it, trying to stick to the bare bones and largely failing. “We got this cow idea in reserve. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Mrs Whitstable twists the loose cotton of the duvet so tight he thinks she’ll tear her fragile skin, and he can’t tell at all what she’s thinking, largely because he’s too scared to look at her face and see what expression she’s making.

“He thought he was doing something nice for you,” Nick says. “He’s been so worried about you and Basil and it was a bit of a distraction, maybe, I don’t know — but he had good intentions. I did as well, for what it’s worth, I just wanted him to have a front page he was really proud of, one that was actually genuinely good, not some crap about a vicar collecting for a new church roof in a bucket.”

There’s a tap on the door and the guy from the desk comes in with a cheery, “Here we go, then.” He’s carrying a tray with a fat little teapot and two cups and saucers on it. “Nice pot of tea for ya, shift that so I can put it down, Mr Grimshaw?”

“Nick,” Nick says, and stacks the muffins off to one side with the assortment of pills and medical paraphernalia.

“Nick,” the guy says. “Can’t believe it — it’s like we’re at Judge’s Houses or something, you’re right there. Let me just —” Nick lets the guy pour for them because trying to wrestle the task out of his hands seems more trouble than it’s worth. He spills a bit in one of the saucers and starts mumbling apologies. “Oh god, I’m —”

Reflexively Nick says, “You look like a pop star, you pour like a pop star….”

It gets him a snigger out of the guy anyway, before he hands Mrs Whitstable her cup and backs out, saying he’ll leave them to it.

“He asked you, then.”
“Yep.”

“And you’ll help him?” Mrs Whitstable says.

“Yes.”

“Be nice if something comes of it,” she says. “Maybe you and him can both send Harry postcards.”

The kind of quiet that Nick thought only existed in period drama descends, taut and raw, and he sits there thinking a lot of white noise nothing that doesn’t lead anywhere for bottomless minutes.

Mrs Whitstable nestles her cup back in her saucer with a clink.

Nick looks up, bracing himself for whatever bollocking he’s about to have to nod and smile through because it’s impolite to defend yourself against an old lady.

But Mrs Whitstable sits a little straighter and says, “It will be a surprise, her visit?”

“Not anymore, obviously.”

“No,” she says sharply, and looks at Nick, like she needs him to understand something without her saying it. “It will be a surprise,” she says. “A very lovely one.”

Nick holds her gaze for long enough the rest of the room goes fuzzy, trying to work out if she’s really proposing what he thinks she is.

“We’ll take the pictures in front of that window.” She gives the bay where Pig’s snoozing a curt nod. “The light in the afternoon is — well, even an amateur should be able to get something decent in it.”

“You’d do that? You’d do that for Harry?” he says, and she nods, tight and fast. “Once an actress always an actress, eh?”

“You better bloody believe it.”

—*—


He left Mrs Whitstable with a desperate need for carbohydrates and god, it’ll just compound everything if he has to tackle that fucking hill and go to Asda.

Barbara pops her head out from the back room where she was working on an order of granary rolls. “You get your days wrong?” she says. “He’s at his cat job.”

“I know. Just fancied some lunch,” Nick says, “if you’re not too busy?”

She wipes her hands off on her apron and gets her little notebook out of the pocket. “What’ll it be, then?”

“Christ, I wasn’t going to order so much you’ll need to write it down. I’ll just have a turkey salad bap
for me and —” He pauses. “— a pastrami and hole-y cheese for Harry.”

“Don’t know how he can eat that stuff.” Barbara makes a series of squiggles in her notebook before tucking the pencil back into her hair, where it stays, rigid like a hairpin, in her bun. “You all right to wait a minute while I get these done? Big office sent me a late request for a sandwich run.”

Nick smiles and takes a seat at the little table in the corner. He’s still not seen anyone eat lunch at it, but there’s holly in the jar that doubles as a vase and someone’s redone the menu so everything’s ringed in poinsettia and bells with a sprig of mistletoe above the specials. Pig rests her head on Nick’s knee and he pats her ears. “We’re taking another little trip to the vet,” he says, “but there’s no reason to panic.”

He wishes his own heart believed it; he can’t stop thinking about how he wouldn’t feel half as bad about Mrs Whitstable lying to Harry if his own falsehoods and half-truths weren’t piggyback on top of it.

“Maybe you can have some turkey if you’re good.”

Out the back Barbara makes a noise which seems to suggest the business of talking to animals is one she disapproves of, so Nick calls out to her, “Here, how’re Harry’s mince pies selling? He made me road test at least half a dozen different spice and fruit combinations even though I kept telling them they were all as nice as each other.”

“We went with the one with added pear,” Barbara says. “I’ll get you a couple.”

“Oh no you needn’t—”

“You want cranberry on your turkey?”

“Might as well, mightn’t I.”

Some kind of timer pings and Barbara disappears from view. When she comes back, it’s with a paper bag with season’s eatings written on the front, and she flips it over to close it and lays it on the table. She retreats behind the counter and gets two rolls out of the display, selecting a mini cottage loaf and a bagel even though Nick didn’t specify. One of them gets a dollop of cranberry and the other a scraping of fancy grainy mustard, and it’s a kind of wizardry, the way she throws tomato slices into exactly the right place while barely looking, the way she peels the thin slices of meat away from each other with one hand and drapes them perfectly while grabbing a handful of lettuce with the other. Each one gets its own bag as well, twisted over at the top. She adds them and two cans of Diet Coke to Nick’s table.

“Give me three quid,” she says, “since it’s you.”

On the drive, Nick forgoes the radio in favour of listening to a mix he made on his phone last year, stuff he used to calm himself down on the way to the studio. It’s a bit like being catapulted back to having a camera in his face and Caroline Flack staring him down and asking who he’s going to send home. He tightens his grip on the steering wheel and tells himself not to be ridiculous, that Curtis Mayfield existed long before Simon Cowell got his pec implants on prime time, so he’ll be damned if he lets the experience ruin what is objectively one of the greatest songs of all time.

The route’s familiar now, enough that he doesn’t really have to think about it, and the sprout farm rises to meet him like an old friend. There’s a scarecrow dressed like an elf, its tunic blowing in the breeze, and as he crests the brow of the incline there’s a Santa too, its hat being used as a perch by a
quite aggressive looking crow. He pulls onto the driveway of All Creatures Great and Small and
retrieves his lunch from the passenger seat, awkwardly getting out with it all cradled to his chest and
having to shut the door with his foot. He can’t get Pig out like that though so he stashes everything
on the roof while he retrieves her, loops her lead around his wrist, and tries again, stuffing the cans
into his pockets. He has to open the door to the vet’s using a manoeuvre that’s a quick grab at the
handle hoping he can do it faster than gravity can realise he has no real control over the bags he’s
clutching to his chest, but it works, even though the bag with the mince pies in is making for his
armpit. Nick tries to catch it with his chin but has to settle for walking in like he’s halfway into a
limbo competition.

Harry’s sitting behind the desk, still. His antlers are askew and he has a pen clutched between his
teeth and a look of intense concentration on his face. He glances up at the jangle of the bell and grins
around it, types a little faster. “Whaffyoudoinhere?”

That’s the question, isn’t it? Nick’s had two dozen miles to think about it and he’s still not sure, only
that going anywhere Harry wasn’t didn’t feel like a thing he wanted to do. He drops the bags he was
carrying on the desk and leans over it to take the pen from between Harry’s teeth. “I brought you
lunch, don’t eat that or you’ll spoil it.”

“You brought me lunch?”

With a flourish — or what would be one if the cans weren’t just a little too large to remove at speed
— Nick produces the Diet Coke from his pockets and sets them next to a box of latex gloves. “Mrs
W says hi.”

“She all right?”

“Tough as old boots, that one,” Nick says, avoiding his eyes, even though it’s pretty much the truest
thing he could possibly say.

Harry finishes whatever it was he was doing on the ancient computer and hops off his chair. “I’m
taking my break,” he says, to someone out the back, “there’s no one due.”

A muffled, “fine,” comes from behind one of the doors down the corridor, and Harry takes the cans.

The break room is like something out of drama about medical students who never sleep and have sex
in unsavoury places, except with decidedly more cat posters. There’s a green sofa against one wall
that’s got two sizeable stains on it — and that’s just the bit Nick can make out from between the
textbooks that have been strewn across it. Nick picks one up and immediately regrets it when the first
thing his eyes fix on is something that looks like intestines and a soldering iron burning away bits of
it.

Harry collects it from his hands, lifting an eyebrow at what’s presumably Nick’s expression of
horror, and folds himself up in a seat at the table, which at least is clear of everything except a couple
of battered copies of heat magazine.

Nick winces at the thought he might be in one of them, but Harry just shoves them to one side to
make enough space for them to eat. “What d’you bring me, then?” Nick gently tosses him the bag
with the pastrami bagel in and his eyes widen as he peeks inside. “This is incredible. I was literally
just thinking how much I wanted one.”

“What can I say?” Nick says. “I’m psychic.” He opens his own bag. Some of the lettuce has drifted
to one side so he redistributes it and sticks it back down with a combination of cranberry and mayo.
“We got dessert as well.”
Harry nudges Nick’s foot with his under the table and grins as he takes a large bite of his bagel. He loses a bit of tomato out the side of his mouth and has to fold it in, nodding at the taste, his antlers bobbing. Maybe it’s the ridiculousness of him that makes the thing Nick knows he should say that starts *there’s something I should tell you* die in his throat. “What vet stuff you done this morning, then?”

“We had a dog come in to be neutered — budgie needing a beak trim — slow morning though, really, two people cancelled ’cos they were coming on the bus and it broke down.”

They eat the rest of their lunch chatting about nothing in particular. Nick steers the conversation away from Mrs Whitstable and lets his thoughts go with it, and it’s reasonably successful until they’re both done and dropping their cans into the bin. Harry gets really into Nick’s space, and when Nick doesn’t do anything but stand there quietly mystified, he takes a step forward.

“So if you’re psychic now,” Harry says, pushing Nick against the wall with a hand on his chest, “can you tell what else I want?”

His eyes are dancing when he meets Nick’s gaze and Nick likes it more than is probably reasonable, the suggestion on the twitching corner of his mouth.

“Crisps?” he says, but Harry’s already sinking to his knees.

He doesn’t even take his antlers off and great, now Nick is literally a character in a drama about veterinary students who have ridiculous sex in unsavoury places, one that curls his fingers into someone’s hair and closes his eyes against all the ways he’s fucking up their life.
I saw a performance artist once who opened their show with: “I’ll know that I love you when I think about you dying.”

The rest of the show was a mess — a line about not suiting gold jewellery ran into a comment about the media and the final thing which tied everything together never came — but that line about love and tragedy moved into my head immediately and has never left.

I catch myself doing it, picturing catastrophes that have befallen my loved ones, plotting in my head the emotional landscape of my reaction, weighing it almost to see if it’s good enough. It’s become a measure of where I’m at with someone. If they’re late and I assume they got stuck in traffic, I start to wonder whether they actually mean anything to me, because at the first flutter of genuine attachment I think about ditches and all the ways someone can end up in one, use every single thing I’ve ever seen on a crime show or the news as a roadmap of horror onto which their evening now becomes tacked.

And I wonder, if I’d never heard that poet say it, would I be thinking like this? Is it their fault? Or is it something my psyche is doing to prepare itself? Is it rehearsing going on without them? Does it want me to know I could carry on living a life which they’re not a part of in case of a rejection other than death? I don’t know what it’s done to me that images of disaster are inextricably tangled up with hearts and flowers, but I’ve fucking hated performance art ever since, I’ll tell you that.

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Radgate Hall is, as Nick predicted, like something out of Downton Abbey at Christmas.

The bannisters of every staircase are wrapped in garlands of pine with dried berries and oranges woven in, each one tied on with a blousy gold bow. A giant poinsettia has practically taken over the reception desk. In the dining room, the tables each have a centre piece of candles and pine and apples dusted with fake snow, the whole thing presided over by a plump Christmas tree with intricate wiry gold baubles at the ends of branches wound around with discreet fairy lights. Piano versions of carols and Bing Crosby float down from the ceiling. One of the inhabitants mooches down the corridor in a waltz with an imaginary partner and all the staff are wearing robin earrings or mistletoe brooches or tinsel in their hair.

Nick wishes he could appreciate it all for what it is, see only the surface and forget what’s making his veins thrum with anxiety and anticipation. He’s almost told Harry fourteen times, rehearsed it in his head with all the most clichéd lead-ins: there’s something you should know, about that will I went to find, I gotta tell you something about Joan. One thing he can attest to is those clichés look a lot easier to deliver on TV than they are in real life, and he now knows there are in fact fourteen variations on: never mind, I’ll tell you later, no it’s nowt important finish that cake thing you’re making for that friend who’s been lying to you and who’s going to attempt to make it up to you with a performance worthy of Olivier.

Harry looks at him at the sign-in desk. “Big day, then,” he says, with a grin.

“This is well cool,” the guy on reception says. He goes by the name Liam The Pain Payno on
Twitter and Nick can’t stop thinking about his earnest Bieber cover as he gives them both a thumbs up. “I always wanted to be a spy. Like, without the killing people part. Hey by the way thanks for following —”

“We all set, then?” Nick says, and shifts the box he’s carrying onto his hip, hinting it’s heavy when really it weighs less than the lightest weights at the gym.

Liam nods through a list of arrangements — tea and arrival times and Mrs W’s medication schedule — and Nick just stands there with the fake smile he used to do when cornered by a journalist he hated while secretly praying to carpet and furniture polish and sofas for rescue. This is it, this is exactly how people must feel when they’re about to get married to someone they’ve decided they don’t want to marry, only they can’t figure out how to get out of it without looking them in the eye and saying, “Sorry, I don’t.”

“Let’s crack on, shall we?” Liam says.

As he leads them down the corridor, Nick looks around for something else to wish on, only he’s not even sure what to wish for: that Mrs W can pull off the act of pretending not to be sitting across from nearly a lifetime of heartbreak or that the truth comes spilling out, only in a way that somehow still gives Harry his fantasy festive front page. Maybe he should limit himself to making it to midnight without Harry screaming in his face that he’ll never trust him again.

In her room, Mrs Whitstable sits in the chintzy chair by the window, a book of apparently fiendish crossword puzzles slouched over the arm. There’s a garland of pine draped across the bottom of the frame and a vase of fresh holly and lilies behind her, which will at least look nice in the pictures.

Harry knocks on the doorframe even though the door’s open, does a little dance of greeting, and jigs into the room. He’s got Basil a jacket for the occasion — red with a snowflake pattern — and he trots in like he’s the star of the entire event while Pig makes straight for the decorations and starts mouthing a slice of dried orange.

“Gerroff,” Nick mutters as he follows her in.

“Oh, wasn’t expecting you so early,” Mrs Whitstable says, even though she’s done a full face of make-up, teased her hair into a softer shape and the air’s tinged with roses, like she’s had a spritz of perfume.

Harry crouches down at her knees. “How you feeling today, love?” he says.

“Fine. What’s all this?” she says, glancing at the boxes they’re carrying.

“We’ve got a little something arranged for you.”

Mrs Whitstable lifts a hand to her throat. As reaction faces go, it’s a little stagey but Nick supposes she’s out of practise.

“Don’t ruin it,” Nick says, while batting Pig’s nose away from the pine garland. “You don’t tell someone there’s a surprise.”

“What if she has a heart attack though?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my heart, you cheeky bugger.” Mrs Whitstable narrows her eyes. “What you up to, young man?”

“There’s cake,” Harry says, faux coyly. “No more spoilers.” He straightens up with a grin and starts
clearing things off the table next to the armchair.

Nick meets Mrs Whitstable’s eye. He’s never been part of a conspiracy before and he’s not sure how he’s supposed to play it; his stomach is about as knotty as the laces on an old pair of trainers. She jerks her head pointedly toward the window as if Nick has forgotten his line. “How ‘bout in front of the window instead?” Nick says.

Harry nods and moves the table over to the other side of the chair, adjusting it and the curtains so it’s nicely framed but Mrs Whitstable can still reach it. He pulls another chair over from the other corner. Outside, it is quite the picture of a winter afternoon — no snow, which would’ve finished things off nicely, but there’s a holly tree laden with berries and the hills pop nicely up beneath a sky full of fluffy, smooshed together clouds. He beckons for the box Nick got lumbered with carrying.

Liam comes in with a tray of cups and saucers and a pot of tea. “Over here, yeah?”

“That’s incredible, thanks.”

Nick swallows the thing he would say about that being a bit of an exaggeration for crockery, however nicely matching it is, because Harry’s got that smile on his face that he saves for when he’s really pleased with himself about something, docile and a bit otherworldly. He and Liam lay all the cakes out on a three-tier stand, fussing unnecessarily over turning the handles of the cups so they face the same way.

Mrs Whitstable does her part too, chipping in with a stream of, “What’s going on?” and “What’s all this fuss?” and “What on earth are you all up to?” She even goes as far as to fake some concern she’s going to miss her physio appointment.

Liam ducks down. “Don’t you worry yourself about that,” he says. “Rescheduled it for you didn’t I — tomorrow morning I’ll come and get you. Today we’re just doing something a bit special.”

When he straightens, his gaze fixes on the window and his eyes go comically wide. Liam taps Harry’s shoulder and points.

Beyond the window and over the top of one of the immaculate hedges, Nick catches a glimpse of a Rolls Royce Phantom purring its way down the drive.

Making a noise of soft alarm, Harry quickly re-arranges the dainty macrons he did in red and green and white on the top tier of the cake stand, and bends down to eye level with the finger sandwiches assessing each one.

“You going to get a spirit level?” Nick says. He gets a glare of mild rebuke so Nick tries to soften it with, “They look great, stop worrying.”

Harry ignores him, gets out a wicker basket full of orange and cranberry muffins that genuinely look like something out of Bake Off and settles them on the window ledge next to the flan he’s been stressing about all week, which apparently was desperately in vogue when Florence was and something of a speciality at Cafe Royal.

“Well this is a lot of nonsense,” Mrs Whitstable says, while Basil plaintively looks between them.

Nick leans out of the doorway to peer down the hall. The same voice he heard on the phone is making small talk at reception and he ducks his head back into the room. “We’re on,” he says.

He shoots Mrs Whitstable a look but she’s fussing with Basil and muttering to Harry so he goes back out into the hall.
Florence is quite a sight — it’s like she’s got a portable wind machine with her, the way her coat billows — it’s one of those classic ageless ones Nick always envies that’s the shade of brown that goes with everything. Even though it’s more wrinkled than in any of the pictures, her face is impeccable — high cheekbones and a rich, painted-on red mouth — and she pulls her leather gloves off as she walks without looking at them and tucks them into the handle of her bag, where they stay, like they know their place.

“Hello,” Nick says. “We spoke on the phone.”

“Ah,” she says, and strides toward him to take his hand. “What a pleasure.” Hers is stony, rings on her fingers digging into his hand where they’ve spun around on her thin fingers.

“Glad you could make it.” Nick unintentionally uses the prim and proper voice he used to save for guests who were old enough to be his mum and inspired in him some impulse to act as if it was 1950. “You coming in or what?” he says, deliberately forcing himself to be himself again.

She nods at Liam as he backs against the drip and glides over to the window, to where Mrs Whitstable is sitting. “Oh darling,” Florence says. “Hello.”

Nick presses his lips together, focused on Mrs Whitstable.

She sinks back in her chair, hand rising to her throat, to where the memory of pearls twist around her finger. “Well I nev—”

“Surprise!” Harry says.

Florence ducks down to give Mrs Whitstable a kiss on the cheek, steadying herself on the back of the chair. When she straightens, she slips her coat off in one elegant movement and Harry darts forward to take it, then doesn’t know quite what to do with it, and ends up laying it on the bed next to his and Nick’s like they’re having a house party.

“And you must be Harry?” Florence says. Her jumper — which is butterscotch and quite obviously very high-end cashmere — glints with a broach in the shape of a holly wreath and she pushes up the sleeves to reveal tennis bracelets which must be worth more than most people earn in a year. “I heard such wonderful things.” She gives Harry a double hand shake, wrapping her other around his and smiling at him benevolently as she squeezes.

She takes the chair Harry moved to the other side of the table, gives him another quick smile like she would a waiter as he pours them both a cup of tea, before leaning in to touch Mrs Whitstable’s hand. “Well,” she says, “you have been in the wars, haven’t you, Joanie?”

Across the room, Liam gives Nick a would-be stealthy double thumbs up. Probably he’s seeing something else than Nick is in Mrs Whitstable’s stunned mullet face and the way she reaches for her throat and trembles, “Is it really..? It can’t be. How did you —?”

Nick feels a bit sick.

“When I heard,” Florence says, slipping her fingers over the back of Mrs Whitstable’s veiny hand, “I dropped everything. If I’d known I would’ve come immediately. How are you?”

Mrs Whitstable gives a throaty chuckle. “Old. Can’t say I recommend it,” she says, and the crack in her voice is a bit too real for Nick’s nerves. She swallows and lays her hand over Florence’s. “You, though — you haven’t changed.”

“Youshan’tstillbesayingthatwhenyouputyourglasseson,” Florence says, eyelashes dipping like
there's a shadow of ancient coyness still there somewhere beneath the painted surface.

“Do you mind if we take a quick picture for the paper?” Harry says.

“Not at all, so long as you get my good side,” Florence says, and she rearranges on her seat like her body remembers exactly which bits should stick out and which should be sucked in, the line of her jaw tilted towards the camera even before Harry’s finished getting it out of his bag.

It’s Kardashian-worthy posing and Nick can see the shift in Mrs Whitstable too, pushing to one side her illness and injuries and turning her face so the light should catch it just so.

“That’s perfect.”

Harry takes some shots of just the two of them, then more of Liam pretending to be pouring tea with a smile on his face that says this is definitely getting clipped out of the paper by his mum and pinned in pride of place on the fridge. Harry snaps Florence behind the chair and Basil on Mrs Whitstable’s lap – that one will probably look like a vintage sapphic Christmas card – and he gestures for Nick to get in for one too. Nick settles behind Mrs Whitstable, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze.

When that’s done and Harry’s about to stow it in the bag, Nick reaches for the camera. “Here, let me get one of you too, or your mum’ll kill me.”

He’s not much of a photographer, but he thinks he captures something of the moment, taking it before Harry’s looking up from Basil and Basil’s staring right back up at him, Mrs W sneaking a look at Florence.

“Been a long time, right, since you’ve heard from each other?” Liam says.


“Right,” Nick says, “who wants a slice of that flan?”

They spend an hour or so with Florence telling stories — she doesn’t need much encouragement to lament about a broken ski lift or the time Mrs Whitstable was in that awful play with the co-star with breath so bad she used to sneak into his dressing room during the interval and spray his costume with aftershave to try and cover it — and Harry records them all on his phone. He asks a few questions about how they feel about seeing each other again, gets a nice quote out of Mrs Whitstable about how it’s made her Christmas, and after that, she says she’s feeling up to a little voyage around the grounds, so Liam helps get her bundled up and into a wheelchair.

Florence gets the door and demands to be the one who pushes her, and they all follow a few steps behind as she guides it down the ramp out the back and into the knitting pattern garden, stacked heels of her shoes digging into the gravel. “You’re not too cold, darling?” she says.

“Bit of fresh air’ll do me good,” Mrs Whitstable says.

Harry takes some more pictures of them when they’re not looking. He leans in to show Nick one of Mrs Whitstable actually smiling, Florence’s long, dyed hair swinging as she leans down to say something for only Joan to hear.

It’s not a bad afternoon, in the end.

Everything draws to a close in a flurry of kisses and wishes for a happy Christmas. Harry gives Florence a box of assorted leftovers before helping her into the back of her car, and they all wave as she rolls away. Liam takes Mrs W back inside and says she’ll be the talk of the dining room, and
Nick wishes he could follow them in and make sure she’s all right but he can’t think of a way to do it without it looking weird when Harry’s tugging on his hand and saying, “Let’s get it written before I forget all the good bits.”

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It’s freezing in the office, the heater not at all up to the task of banishing the condensation from the windows. Nick puts the kettle on to boil, more in the hope it might take the edge off the room than genuine desire for another cup of tea.

Still wrapped up in his scarf, Harry uploads the pictures, nose almost on the screen as he flicks through them to find the best. “I like the one with you in,” he says.

“I should hope so but you’re not using it.” Nick wrestles a Christmas card from someone named Gary out of Basil’s mouth and holds him to his chest so he can’t try and snaffle it again. “Use one with Liam, be good for his profile.”

“Like on Tinder?”

Basil strains against Nick’s fingers. “No,” Nick says, rolling his eyes. “His profile, his media profile. He wants to be a singer, doesn’t he.”

“Does he? Is he any good?” Harry glances over. “Should we mention it? In the article? What should I say?”

“Give it here,” Nick says.

He tucks Basil into his side and slides the laptop over, opens the article that they’ve both been adding background to for the last few weeks. He skims for an appropriate place and — with one finger — at length — adds: We reunited the former socialites and best pals with the help of care worker Liam Payne, who is also a budding singer who’s built up a solid YouTube following thanks to his impeccable R’n’B riffs and soulful eyes.

Harry leans into his arm to read it. “Soulful eyes?”

“You got to give people a reason to look his stuff up.”

“You’re way too good at this, you know.”

Basil scrabbles against Nick’s chest. Great, when better to confront his past than when he’s got an armful of irritated dachshund. “I’m a pro,” Nick says.

And he could carry on – he could say it right now, that he’s had that line dropped into stuff about him — the sly drive-by promo for shows or events — he could start the conversation he knows they need to have as easy as thing is.

Thing is I’ve not been entirely honest.

Thing is I was on X Factor and Radio 1.

Thing is, I had a sort of fame and I think it broke something inside me or I wanted it so badly because I was broken.
“Thing is —”

His heart’s doing a fandango.

He holds Basil to him and lets out a breath to try and steady himself. He’s not sure how to say it, that he came here to wallow in his own past for the promise of financial gain and redefining himself for the next stage of his career, and that somehow, instead, he started feeling like someone looking at their life through a prism which fractured what they knew was reality into fiction and now he’s not entirely sure who he is.

“Thing is – it’s hard being a singer,” Nick says, “you know, to get a break. Every little helps.”

Harry makes a small noise that might be surprise or maybe just annoyance that Nick’s talking and leans in to the pictures. He does choose one of Liam and drops it into the page layout, adjusting it until Liam’s dead centre with Florence and Mrs Whitstable on either side.

The kettle trumpets that it’s done boiling and Harry taps away at the mouse, adding some filters and whatnot to make them all look more presentable. Nick makes them both a cup of tea and sits down with Basil on his knees at the desk. He plays the little bits of interview Harry recorded over a few times, and starts making some notes he can use to flesh out the story. When Harry’s done with the pictures, Nick drags the laptop over and adds Florence’s story about the dressing room because it goes nicely with an old picture Harry found of them both sat in front a bulbed starlet mirror doing their make-up and the quote about Christmas.

Harry takes it back, reads it over with pursed lips and a wrinkled brow, and adds a line. He slides the laptop over so Nick can skim it for typos. Nick changes notable socialist to socialite and adds a line about Florence bringing some glamour out on her old pal’s cheeks, smiling at the way Harry’s finished the piece off with a little line about tis the season to check on anyone who might be lonely, turn to page seven for some quick, comforting food ideas to take over as a gift.

“Ok, then,” Harry says. He calls up the email and types in quick instructions for the printer.

With a sigh, he hits send.

“Done,” he says. “Let’s get out of here.”

The road back to the pub shines with recently shed rain, and Nick balls his hands in his pockets while Pig trots alongside him, huffing out plumes of breath and making a racket about it. Harry chatters about how pleased he is to have a front page that would make Pat proud, and panic starts to rev in Nick’s chest, the thought that Harry only wanted his help with this issue and nothing else whirring in his head.

By the time they stop under the swinging tankard sign, he’s pretty much rehearsed a whole thing in his head. Harry will say, “Well thanks, see you round,” and that’s that — and that’s the best-case scenario — infinitely preferable to the one where Harry has figured it all out and calls him a liar. In the row they’re now having in his head, somehow in the act of defending himself from the accusation, Nick blurts out the entire thing about Mrs Whitstable and how they’ve just sent a quite elaborate facade to print to be distributed about the neighbourhood just in time for Christmas. Head Harry throws mulled wine in his face, and great, now Nick’s bones are shaking in a way that’s really very little to do with the abundant cold. He goes through declarations about how he only wanted Harry to think he was normal and helpful and good at journalism, how he only did it so Harry would be happy. He’s so busy imagining himself falling to his knees in a puddle, begging for another
chance while trying not to let on how much dropping down hurt, that he almost misses it when Harry says, “You coming up?”

Mistaking Nick’s hesitation for something else, he steps closer, curls his fingers into Nick’s scarf, and adds, “Mum’s out. Another date. So. Place to ourselves.”

“With the Facebook guy?” Nick says.

“Yeah. He’s taken her to his work Christmas party. Probably be a late one,” he adds, with a slow smile.

It feels too banal to be real. Nick smiles in reply and follows him through the bar, Harry saying hello to all the locals and picking Basil up to wave his paw at the girl behind the pumps. The narrow hallway out the back and the cramped staircase seem even tighter with them both and Pig and the row Nick still thinks they’re inevitably going to have in it, and they spew out into the lounge like a crowd at a football stadium.

Harry shucks his coat and hat and shakes his hair out, takes Nick’s coat for him and hangs it in the airing cupboard by the bathroom. He hides the post on top of the fridge where Basil can’t get to it and gets his bowl down, finds another for Pig and shakes the bag of food at Nick. “This all right for her? It’s new but we had a sample at work and Basil really loves it.”

There’s a picture of a healthy, happy dog of mixed origins on the front and a note that the food is made from 100% organic chicken with a bunch of things Nick can’t pronounce added for strong teeth and bone density. Pig leaps for the bag but Harry holds it away.

“Sit, Pig.” Pig stops jumping about at least and lifts one paw. “No, sit. Sit.” She stares him down for a moment and then does what Basil does, plonking her bum on the floor. “Waaaaaat.” Harry eyes them both while he pours the food out. “Good dogs.”

The second he dips down with the bowls they crowd him, crunching merrily before he’s even really put them on the floor. He pats Pig’s ribs and straightens up. “You want something?”

“Depends, you going to make me beg for it?”

Harry meets his eye, lifts an eyebrow.

Nick goes tight and hot all over and then just cracks. He clutches for Harry’s shoulders and tastes the softness of his lip, gathering him and the surprise on his face up together. He’s vaguely aware of Harry scrunching the bag of dog food up, then the way he scrabbles to set it down before giving Nick his full attention, pressing his tongue into Nick’s mouth and writhing up into him.

It’s in the back of Nick’s head that he hasn’t kissed anybody in more than a decade who was only interested in the bits of him that were really him — he met people at parties and on the radio but they all got this shiny, polished, performative version of Nick Grimshaw, and that’s who they liked. Maybe he’s forgotten how acute reality can be and that’s why, with Harry, he always feels like he’s pitching out of an aeroplane.

He lets Harry take over, and Harry backs him from the lounge to his room, past the desk where he keeps all his lenses, and over a tangled pile of clothes to the bed. It all feels very distant, the room, that Harry’s pawing at his jumper, everything but the way Harry’s breath goes laboured as they kiss, because inside he’s just kind of going oh.

Oh, that’s why I can’t tell you.
Oh, that’s what I’m afraid of losing.

Oh, this is completely fucking terrifying.

Harry stops, runs a thumb down the muscle in Nick’s neck, and he looks up at him, eyes big and suggestive as he gives Nick a little shove.

Shuddering somewhere low in his stomach, Nick drops back onto the duvet. The bed’s not got much give to it, creaks underneath him, and he reaches for Harry’s hip to pull him in, stretching up to meet him when Harry leans down for a kiss. The material of Harry’s jumper has soft ridges as he thumbs it and, like he can counteract the thoughts making his heart thump, Nick nips Harry’s lip, gets a grin against his mouth for his trouble. Harry tugs his jumper and the aged, thin t-shirt he had on underneath off. He has one of those stomachs people get when they actually do all the different kinds of sit-ups you’re supposed to instead of lying texting on the mat and pretending it counts.

Nick peppers little kisses along the ridge of muscle, letting his bottom lip drag until his mouth’s open against Harry’s skin. He stays there, Harry clutching at his hair to hold him where he is.

“I want —” Harry’s voice has gone and he clears his throat. Leaning back just enough to see, Nick skims all of his nipples in turn, not missing the way running the pad of his thumb over even the smallest one makes Harry list into him, like a drunk. “You got a favourite?”

“I’m not choosing,” Nick murmurs. He flicks his tongue against the nub of the medium size one, carries on down Harry’s stomach as far as he can reach, rubbing his thumb the wrong way through the trail of hair there, until he gets to the waistband of Harry’s jeans. “What were you saying?” The top of his boxers is peeking out and Nick lingers purposefully on the elastic, watching the bulge underneath react. He runs his finger round the button at Harry’s fly and looks up to meet his eye.

Harry swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing exaggeratedly. “Just. If you wanted to —?”

He can’t say it, apparently, only curl his fingers in Nick’s hair and nudge his zip in the vague direction of Nick’s mouth. Nick’s used to guys who text beforehand with a list of likes and things which will make them leave. It’s endearing and frightening in equal measure Harry’s not like them. He takes his time undoing the stud and dragging the zip down, peels the denim back just enough to get a boxer tent to work with because at least he knows what to do with that. Sex. He can do sex. It’s everything else that’s his nightmare. “This, yeah?” Nick says. He strokes over Harry’s dick, wetting his lip at the same time. “Can I?”

“Yeah? Yeah.”

He touches the side of Harry’s dick through the cotton of his boxers, running his hands down the backs of his legs to urge him in closer, to crawl up and over him on the bed. A bit of him wants to tug Harry down until he’s flat on his back — it’d probably be easier — but he wants to see if he can make Harry’s knees tremble so he scoots back towards the pillows and reaches for Harry to urge him to come with him.

Harry follows, steadies himself on Nick’s shoulder, big hand spanning where his jumper meets his neck, fingers sneaking just inside as he tugs on it to indicate Nick should take it off. He helps Nick struggle out of it, and when Nick emerges, Harry rakes his fingers down Nick’s chest to where he’s straddling it, knees almost tucked under Nick’s armpits.

He’s breathing heavily already and he brings his other hand down to squeeze at the base of his dick, jerking at his own touch. When Nick looks, his face is serious, lips parted like he’s concentrating. Nick’s fantasy version featured a slightly larger component of youthful exuberance and giggling
ineptitude, but of course Harry would be sincere about getting a blow job.

Of course he would.

Nick reaches for him to urge him further up, kisses his stomach above the waistband of his boxers and inches the fabric down, slipping his dick free. He wraps his fingers around it over Harry’s, rearranges himself for an angle he can work with, and guides it towards his lips. At the first touch of his tongue, Harry pitches forward, one of his hands hitting the wardrobe next to the bed, the other on the wall behind Nick’s head to steady himself.

“Sorry,” he mutters.

Nick gives him a minute to get used to the feel of it before he really goes for it and tries to make Harry dig his fingernails into paint and fake wood.

~*~

He’s naked in Harry’s bed. It’s weird that he’s taken so long to get here when being here feels entirely inevitable, like whatever course his life had taken, eventually he would’ve called by this moment at some point. Or maybe not quite this one, with Harry mouthing at his chest to get his attention, orgasm having worn off, but something like it. Everything he was worried about feels a million miles away; he wants to stay here forever.

He wraps a strand of Harry’s hair around his finger just to watch it slide off again and Harry looks up from where he’s teasing Nick’s skin with his teeth. He’s lazy eyed and turned on, which might actually be Nick’s favourite look on him. He leans down for a kiss, intending it to be soft, but Harry responds with fervour and after a moment, his fingers are sliding over Nick’s stomach and down, as if his dick needs actually persuading to join in.

“What else you up for, then?” Nick murmurs.

“I’ve got toys and lube and stuff. Why? What are you — er — into?”

“I’d say toys and lube and… stuff just about covers it.” Harry bites the fleshy part of his chest and Nick yelps and shoves at him, which only serves to make Harry laugh. “Fine, then. Let’s have a look at your stash.”

Rolling off him, Harry flings open the wardrobe door and rummages under a jumper that’s made a break from its hanger. He drops a plug and a bottle of lube that’s been so well-used it’s got a dent in it onto the bed.

Nick leans over to look for himself. Amongst balled up socks and underwear there’s a range of toys in garish plastic and bottles of lube in several flavours, like he got them in a multipack during the Black Friday sale. Nick grabs a vibrator. It’s violently green and full of what look like gobstoppers.

“What the…”

“Oh. Niall got me that as a joke.” Harry cocks his head. “Backfired a bit probably from his perspective, but, like, what’s funnier than me telling him in great detail how it gave me the four best orgasms of my entire life in a single afternoon?”
“Four?” Nick presses the on button. It sounds like someone digging a new Eurotunnel. “Discreet,” he says, but he doesn’t miss the way Harry’s eyes fix on his fingers and his teeth dig into his lip. Nick taps the tip of the thing against Harry’s hip. His dick twitches and so Nick rolls back with it. “Unless you got something you like better?”

Shaking his head and grinning, Harry clammers back in next to him, flinging the duvet up around his shoulders so Nick gets a nice waft of cold air. The weight of Harry’s body as he settles on top of him already feels like something akin to coming home, and he welcomes Harry’s mouth, gripping the plastic of the vibrator for something to cling to while Harry works his tongue in little licks over his lip.

They’re getting pretty good at turning each other on, he thinks, and after a few minutes, Harry’s straddling his hips, his dick hot and heavy when he drags it across Nick’s tummy. Nick works his hand down his spine, feeling the curves and bumps of it, crests the top of his arse, Harry breathing patchily against his mouth when he gets there. Desire is rich and thick in Nick’s chest, head filling with images of Harry mumbling open-mouthed declarations against his face while Nick fucks him with this giant green thing.

The phone rings.

“Oh what?” Harry says, and ignores it in favour of kissing Nick’s cheek before he stops. He runs his hands over his face, and tips off Nick. “Shit. I’m on call,” he says, by way of explanation. He fumbles for the phone like he’s forgotten how to pick things up — which is gratifying — and forces out, “Hello?” He’s a bit husky, clears his throat and tries again. “Hi — yeah?” As the person on the other end talks, his face clouds. “Ok — ok — no — I’m on my way.” He drops the phone back into its cradle, winces at Nick. “I got to go,” he says. “Emergency.”

“Oh — ok.”

With a grimace of apology, Harry rolls out of bed. His arse jiggles as he pulls his jeans straight on and he grabs Nick’s jumper and tugs it over his head, peering at the rain rattling outside before he snatches a hat off the desk too.

Nick peels back the covers and swings a leg out but Harry pushes him back with a hand on his chest.

“No, stay,” he says, with another little shove. “It’s pissing down and Pig’ll get all cold and wet.” He plants a kiss on Nick’s mouth. “Hopefully I won’t be long, but if mum comes back ‘fore I do, tell her not to worry.”

“She’ll be ok that we were —” He waves vaguely, not sure what he’s suggesting.

“I mean… yeah?” He drops another kiss on Nick’s cheek. “I got to go. Sorry,” he adds, and he actually looks it as he backs away.

“Good luck,” Nick says, with a little wave, no idea if that’s the appropriate sentiment.

Once Harry’s gone, Nick flops back on the pillows, not really sure what to do with himself. Wanking might be appropriate but he’s never really been into the idea of being caught by his own mother let alone someone else’s. He gets dressed — or as much as he can when someone’s made off with half his outfit — and pads out into the kitchen to see if he can find something to drink. The dogs appreciate the company at least and he plays tug-o-war with both of them while he works his way down a can of Diet Coke. When they get bored, he flicks on the TV and watches a documentary about the history of the album, which makes him feel at once impossibly young and too nerdy, and then he finds a film about teenagers who end up swapping bodies that he’s sure he’s seen before but
can’t remember the outcome of, annoyingly.

The creak of the stairs alerts him to someone coming up them, and he swivels expecting Harry but it’s not.

“Er — hiya,” he says as Anne comes through the door. Her hair’s jet black with rain and stuck to her face, although her make up’s holding up impressively well. “Harry got a call to go into work — he wanted me to tell you not to worry. God, it’s chucking it down — you want a tea or a hairdryer or owt?”

“Could murder a glass of wine, there’s a bottle in the fridge. Crack into it, will you?” Anne says. She takes her shoes off and stows them neatly in the rack next to the airing cupboard, then peels off her coat to hang up to dry. “I’d be drier if I’d swam.”

Nick gets the wine and two glasses from the cupboard, where he also finds some biscuits — homemade — in a jar. He sets it on the table along with the wine and pulls a chair out for Anne, trying not to feel like he’s doing some parody of trying to be polite to someone’s parent. Given the last time she came home and found him here, though, he’s probably got some ground to make up, although he thinks he did ok with the Sunday dinner test, all things considered.

“How was the big reunion?” Anne says. She scrapes her damp hair up into a ponytail and the resemblance to Harry is, if anything, a bit too striking.

“We had a nice tea and a little walk, got some pretty good pictures for the paper. I took some of Harry — you’ll have to get him to show you but fair warning, I’m not exactly David Bailey.”

“I’m sure they’re lovely.”

For some reason the way she says it makes Nick flush with embarrassment, so he sits down at the table and swirls his wine around. “We got it all written up and off to the printers and everything, anyway.”

“I can’t wait to read it,” Anne says. “I’m going to have to get copies for everyone — all the family want a copy — and Gemma’s friends.”

Nick’s smile he thinks might have a touch of the grimace in it, so he hides it behind taking a sip of his wine. “Oh, this is nice,” he says, just to change the subject. He turns the bottle so he can read the label, as if he knows the first thing about wine beyond the basic difference between a Pinot and a Rioja. “I don’t think I’ve had this before.”

Anne takes the bottle and tops his glass up, even though he’s barely dented it. “Benefits of being in the trade.”

“Suppose you never get stumped when the waiter comes over and end up accidentally ordering something which makes you wince — once when you taste it and again when the bill arrives. I did that one time when I was out with —” Picturing the face of his ex, Nick stops. “— a friend. Trying to show off and pretend to be a real grown up so I ordered without reading it properly. Ended up spending two hundred quid on something which shared all my least favourite attributes with mouth wash.” Anne gives him a chuckle for his effort. “So, how was your date?” Nick says, running his finger down the stem of his glass. “Works do, wasn’t it?”

Anne nods. “Lovely Italian place — they’d done it out with loads of candles and fairy lights and all this mistletoe over the arches in the roof. I’ll show you, hang on.” She dips down to retrieve her phone from her bag, nails clacking on the screen while she scrolls to find a photo. “Here.” She hands
it over to him.

“Oh, romantic,” Nick says, taking in the foliage and the candles and the smiling faces of people he doesn’t know.

“Would’ve been probably if we hadn’t been surrounded by his accountants.” Nick sniffs in sympathy and flicks through the next photos — a selfie of her in a cracker hat and a blurry one of the fairy lights in the ceiling and picture of her pudding. “Give you the address if you want,” she says. “Harry’d love it.”

Nick tries for a smile but getting date spot recommendations from the date in question’s mum is just a touch too awkward for him to handle. “He told you about my cooking, then,” he says.

“Not everyone’s good at everything, love.”

“I’m a special level of disaster,” Nick says. “One time I set a tea towel alight making a salad.” He tries to see it, Harry all dressed up and candlelight on his face, and them having the kind of conversations about open ravioli he’s always hated. “I hope Harry’s not going to get sick of take away.”

Anne looks right at him as if she knows he means *me and my endless ineptitude*. “’Course not.”

The pause that follows feels endless, and as if all of Nick’s innards and insecurities are on show. Anne swills her wine around and says, “Did he give you the map or are you coming with us? He wasn’t sure if you’d want to take Pig and how she’d be in someone else’s car.”

“What?”

“For the Christmas market. You are coming, aren’t you?”

“Am I?”

“Did he not ask you yet?” Anne gives a soft tut and roll of her eyes. “He was going to. We go every year, get each other’s presents.”

“Well if it’s a tradition, maybe I shouldn’t —”

“Nonsense. Gemma’s brought people before and we can’t leave you all on your own.”

Nick smiles. He knows this is the sort of thing he’s supposed to be really into — getting involved in family traditions and weaving his way into Harry’s life — but it just makes him nervous. What if it all goes wrong between them and then forever, every Christmas, Harry’ll be at the market wishing he’d never taken him?

“They do chestnuts,” Anne says, “old fashioned way with a real fire.”

“Oh, in that case,” Nick says. He takes another swig of his wine and looks over to where Pig’s rearranging herself on a patch of warmth in front of the radiator. Basil’s left his usual perch on the sofa and slunk over to curl up with her, and she drapes herself back around him. “Look at them two, spooning.”

“It’s nice they like each other.”

They chat for a bit about Pig and how long Nick’s had her and how Harry’s trying to train Basil not to eat paper but it’s a psychological crutch, and Nick reaches for another biscuit. “He make these?”
At Anne’s nod, Nick bites off a chunk. “He’s really talented in the kitchen, isn’t he?”

“See? You’re perfect for each other. He thinks so.”

Nick nearly chokes on a stray crumb. He swills it down with wine.

Anne frowns at him in concern as he swallows before touching him softly on the arm. “Why don’t you tell me about yourself? All I get from Harry is a string of funny things you said.”

“Well that’s nice,” Nick says, “I’ll have you know I’m very wise as well as non-stop hilarious.” He rolls his eyes dramatically in the hope it’ll help him avoid the question but Anne gives him this encouraging look, like she might actually be interested in his life story. He can’t very well tell her that the entire thing will be available at all good and probably some quite mediocre retailers soon enough, so he pretends he’s a contestant on a game show. “I’m the wrong side of thirty, which you probably guessed, from Oldham originally, been in London ten years, give or take. S’about it, really.”

“You’ve always been a writer?”

“No, this is my first one. Having a bit of a career change or an early midlife crisis or something.” Too late it strikes Nick that that’s a really unfortunate thing to say to the mother of someone you’ve been hanging out with. He pokes at the chocolate chip in his biscuit. “Been interesting — and weird — I don’t know if I’ll do it again.”

“You must be doing all right, though. S’a big house you’ve got.”

Nick feels as if he’s just tipped into a Regency drama, where he’s being quizzed by the heroine’s mother about things like his income and the size of his drawing room. “I got a bit put away for a rainy day. My dad — he drilled it into me that you never know what the future holds. Think my first word was actually *nest egg*, although I’ve still no idea what it really means.”

“It’s good you think about the future. Not everyone does at your age. I didn’t.”

“Well when you’re such a liability at everything else, you got to make up for it somewhere. Not everyone’s got a killer smile like yours to rely on.”

“Charmer,” Anne says, but she’s grinning anyway.

She swills her wine around and drains the glass, pushing it across the table and shaking her head as Nick lifts the bottle in invitation. Outside, the wind stirs up into a howl and throws the rain at the window.

“He get called in a lot at night?” Nick says quietly, glancing at it, even though all he can see is darkness and the reflection of his own hair and the quiet, considered way Anne’s looking at him.

“Sometimes,” she says, “especially during calving season.”

“I’ll pretend I know when that is, shall I?” Nick fingers the stem on his glass. “Be alright, though, right?”

Anne looks at him in question.

“He knows how to drive when it’s like this and he gets his car checked when he should and everything — makes sure his tires are good and stuff?” His heart’s racing. Anne tilts her head in something disquietingly like sympathy. “Of course he does, I’m being silly.” Nick swallows some
more wine down. “I don’t know how he does it — I’m inconsolable watching Super Vet when
things go well, I can’t imagine what it’s like when —”

“They wouldn’t have rung if there wasn’t a chance.”

Nick nods and they sit there quietly for a while, until Anne yawns into the back of her hand.

“I think I’m going to have to turn in,” she says.

“I might just wait up a bit longer if that’s all right?” Nick says.

“You do whatever you want, love.”

Nick smiles goodnight to her, then can’t stop smiling until she’s crossed the flat to her room. He’s not
sure what he’s going for with the constant smiling but it seems the thing to do. Once her door’s
closed, he finishes his glass of wine, tries to get Pig to come and sit with him, but she’s not in the
mood to wake up properly and neither is Basil, so Nick goes to the bathroom for a wee, gets himself
a glass of water, and goes back to Harry’s bedroom.

Outside, the rain’s battering the window, lashing against the pane like a whip in the wind, and he
frowns at it, chest fluttering at the thought of Harry driving on the roads around here in it, stressed
and tired. He curls up against Harry’s headboard, knees against his chest, telling himself again and
again not to be silly. Harry knows those roads well and he’ll be sensible, won’t he?

Nick texts him anyway to see how it’s going and tell him it’s raining and to take care, then grabs a
book from Harry’s shelf and flicks through the pages, reading for ten minutes before he really takes
in enough to spot it’s a textbook on small mammals and not a slow-moving novel about a mouse
with a heart condition.

Nick’s dosed off, hovering in that weird stage of not-awakeness but not-asleepness when he hears
the creak of a floorboard. He blinks awake and Harry’s silhouette makes a shadow at the foot of the
bed, hat and hair and shoulders flattened by the dark. Nick makes a noise he intends to be a greeting
but which never quite forms into a word, lifting his arm in invitation so Harry knows he’s awake.

Harry crawls onto the bed. Instead of going for Nick’s arm, he settles between Nick’s knees, head on
Nick’s stomach. “Don’t let me fall asleep,” Harry murmurs. “I got to be at work in an hour, I’ll feel
worse if I sleep.”

“Ok.” Nick goes to stroke his hair, and finding only damp hat, he has to tug that off first. He combs
through Harry’s hair, it warm under his fingers. “What happened?” he says, quietly, because Harry
left the door open — force of habit, Nick supposes — and he doesn’t want to wake Anne up if it’s
4am.

“Dog. Hit by a car. Didn’t even stop,” he says, slurring one word into the next.

“Oh. That’s not nice. Are they going to be alright? Did you save ‘em?”

“Touch and go for a bit but… yeah I think so.”

The rain outside intensifies, wind actually howling as it races down the road, making the sign outside
rattle on its arm. Nick scrunches his face up at the thought of Harry driving through the storm, even
though he’s got proof right under his hand that everything was fine. “What d’you do?”

“Surgery.”
Nick spreads his fingers, lightly scratching across Harry’s scalp, his heartbeat a dull thud low down in his gut. “What d’you do, during the operation? What’s your, like, role?”

“Um — ” Harry shifts, like Basil does when he’s nesting. “I do gauze and instruments and checking vitals and just another pair of hands, really.”

“You like it? You don’t think it’s gross?” Nick looks down. Harry’s eyes are closed. “You like it?” Nick says, a bit louder, tugs his hair a bit harder. “Come on love, tell me about it. Tell me what you like about it.”

“Ummnnnnnn s’good when… they get better. When they come in broken and then they go home fixed, because life’s not usually like that. Broke things stay broke when no one cares. Like Mrs Whitstable and her friend.”

Nick can’t think what to say, so he lets Harry drift for a bit, just keeps moving underneath him every few minutes so he can’t properly fall asleep. His own eyes are just sliding closed when Harry’s alarm starts burp-burrp-burrping in his pocket.

Harry slides it out, groaning, and silences it on the fourth or fifth try. He collapses on Nick’s leg and attempts to hide his face under Nick’s knee. “God,” he says.

“Come on,” Nick says, and pushes at his shoulder so he can get his leg out from underneath him. He doesn’t stop when Harry doesn’t move, ends up half sitting up next to him, one foot awkwardly out on the cold floor. “Come on, love, you’ll feel better if you start moving.”

“What’re you — ”

“I’ll make you a coffee.” Nick reaches for a jumper that’s fallen out of the wardrobe and tugs it on. It smells of Harry, all vanilla and smoke, and he hugs it to him as he roots around on the floor for his jeans.

Harry’s still sprawled face down on the bed, so Nick goes into the kitchen and makes them both an instant coffee — three spoonfuls of granules and just enough water to mix them into something more drinkable than a paste. He takes it in for him, nudging Harry’s foot with his knee until Harry uncurls and sits up enough to take it. Even in the pre-dawn darkness, Nick can see the smudged hollows under his eyes. If he had his hands free, he might run a thumb over them, try and lessen them with uncharacteristic tenderness, but he doesn’t, so he just hands Harry a mug. “This’ll help,” he says. “Trust me, I’m an expert.”

Harry blows on it, tries it with a grimace, wiping his mouth on the cuff of Nick’s jumper, and sticking his tongue out. “Blerugh.”

“Gimme your keys,” Nick says, and necks his coffee.

Harry sits up all the way, blinking at him. One side of his hair is all flat and staticky and it’s rapidly becoming Nick’s favourite thing. “What?”

“I’m driving.” With reluctant confusion, Harry hands them over. “Go throw some cold water in your face and meet me downstairs.”

“Nick —”

“I know you think I’m a kitchen disaster but I’ve watched enough Bake Off in my time to do a sausage roll under supervision. All else fails I can just keep the coffee coming and make sure you don’t burn the place down.” Harry looks as if he’s about to protest again, so Nick tugs him to his
feet, gives him a shove towards the bathroom, and says, “Face.”

The roads are at once worse than Nick imagined — flooded in places with rain pooled so high he has to crawl right through them, feeling the way around potholes — and less treacherous than he feared because they’re completely empty. The rain’s still coming down, belting the top of Harry’s ancient Range Rover, and Nick peers through the gap created by the wipers before it disappears again under the torrent. It’s a ridiculously short journey but still takes him almost twenty minutes. When he pulls up outside the Bakery, he makes sure Harry’s got the keys before he lets him open the door and run for it using his coat as an umbrella. Nick follows him, bleeping the car shut over his shoulder, and by the time they tumble through the door into the dark shop, he’s winded and damp all up his legs, even though he can’t have been outside more than 30 seconds.

Harry hits the lights out the back, illuminating racks of steel tins and other baking paraphernalia, and ingredients kept in plastic vats. He unhook an apron from the hook on the wall and scrapes his hair back from his face into a lopsided topknot, almost swaying on the spot.

“What first?” Nick says, and he takes the other apron — which is probably Barbara’s — drapes it over his head, catching it on his ear and wrestling with it to get it to sit before he ties it behind him.

Over by the steel slab where all the cooking happens, Harry’s reading his way down a list with his lips pursed. “Dundee cake,” he says. He flips the sheet over, studies the rest, rubbing at his eyes, then reaches for a folder. Inside it are laminated sheets with each recipe written on. He flips to the right one and hands it to Nick. “You up to this?” he says. “You just measure everything and put it in the mixer — except the dried fruit. You just need to toss those in a bit of flour. And the cherries — they need slicing.”

“I can do that,” Nick says. He takes the folder and goes over to the work station closest to the mixer, sets the laminated sheet down like a vicar would some kind of holy tome.

It’s a monster recipe — enough for forty portions — and Nick reads the entire thing twice like he’s doing the technical so he doesn’t miss anything. His bones are muttering that he doesn’t know what he’s doing and it’ll be a disaster and there’ll be nothing to sell and Harry will get fired and then hate him forever, but he ignores them, turns the oven on, and manages to disengage the mixing bowl from the mixer and set it next to the scales. They’re like a bigger version of the one he has at home, so he measures out the flour first, taking a puff of it to the face but getting the number almost exactly on. He adds the sugar to the bowl, cracks in enough eggs, then starts on the fruit, sprinkling flour over them in a separate bowl and leaving them to absorb while he slices the cherries. They stick to his fingers, unwilling to relinquish their grip on him, but he just keeps on, Harry clunking about with loaf tins letting him know he hasn’t fallen asleep in the stock cupboard.

Greasing and lining the tins takes some doing — he has to measure out strips of greaseproof paper and they’re nowhere near as neat as they could be, but he gets each tin wrapped on the inside and spoons the mixture in, arms shaking under the weight of the mixing bowl. Suddenly it makes sense why Harry’s so keen on exercising and where those popped up muscles in his arms came from. Nick goes back to the recipe to check he’s got the next bit right. It calls for covering the top of each cake with almonds in concentric circles. Normally he’d panic about what concentric means or ask for help, but Harry’s on the other side of the kitchen, deep in concentration while he portions some dough letting him know he hasn’t fallen asleep in the stock cupboard.

Nick finds the almonds — even gets it right and goes for blanched ones on the first try — and starts in the centre of the cake, then rethinks and decides going around the rim of the tin first would be neater. He lays them one by one with their points facing towards the rim, then does another ring equally spaced inside them, carries on until he’s done five rings on each and finished them off with a
perfectly placed solo almond in the centre. He brushes them all with egg yolk and slides them into the oven, sets the timer on his phone. He looks down at the door, imbues each of them with a will to come out ok, and fixes a smile on his face before he goes over to see what’s next.

By the time they’re done, Nick’s made Dundee cake and helped with mince pies and sprinkled poppy seeds on the top of rolls, and they’ve both chugged another two of Nick’s special coffees. Harry leans against the wall, kneading at his eyes then blinking them open too wide as he tries to remember where the cake stands are. Nick finds them without him – they were in the thing that looks like a giant robot that washes stuff – and starts arranging the display in the window. He gets spiked in the wrist by holly as he’s doing the mince pies but at least he manages not to bleed on anything. He sets one of his cakes on the stand that draws attention to today’s special on the counter and writes Dundee Cake in scrawly handwriting, adding a little doodle of a snowman. They don’t have any orange chalk so he has to settle for giving it a pink carrot nose, but he thinks it looks quite cute.

Harry heaves a batch of loaves out of the oven — they smell amazing and make Nick hungry in an instant — and brings out the rolls they’ve been waiting for to cool to make up the final part of the display. He drops one and looks like he might cry at the sight of it rolling away under the desk where the cash register sits, so Nick retrieves it. He tosses it in the bin and touches his shoulder to bring him into a hug, wrapping his arms around him and letting Harry sag against him. “Nearly done,” he says. Harry squeezes around his middle.

Barbara comes in just as the day’s delivery of meat and cheese arrives, shaking the rain off her enormous spotty mac like a dog might and giving everything the once over.

“What are these almonds on backwards?” she says.

“What?”

“They’re upside down. Points are supposed to go the other way. ’Suppose so long as they taste alright.” She herds the guy with the trays of meat and cheese into the back, pausing to look at Harry. “You better not be coming down with something,” she says, but she lets him go early, anyway.

The rain’s abating a little by the time they get back to the pub, daylight just picking its way over everything with a gloomy grey reluctance. Harry tugs on Nick’s sleeve, apparently beyond all words, and Nick follows him through the empty pub and up the stairs and into his bedroom without comment. They toe off their shoes and topple onto the bed, and Harry crawls onto Nick’s chest, asleep by the time his eyelids have finished flickering closed.

Nick hugs him close, inside of his head flashing with ditches and headlines. He tries to imagine what his life would look like without Harry in it; finds he can’t. It’s probably just being up all night and the caffeine he’s chugged, but it makes him want to cry. He presses his lips to Harry’s forehead and screws his eyes shut.

“It’s ok. You’re here and you’re fine,” he says, like it’s Harry who needs to hear it.
I think I always had the ability to get temporarily invested in the lives of passing strangers.

When I was about 11, I got obsessed with the lady who lived over the road. She moved in over the summer and every day I’d see her get all dressed up in her jogging clothes and power walk to the end of the street like she meant business. But one day I caught her in the park getting a 99 from the ice cream van. Then the next day I happened to be in the park with my sister and she was there again, no jogging, just sitting on one of the benches with a book she got out of her zipped-up top. Another day I saw her waving to someone inside the house, then just nipping round the side passage between it and number 16 and waiting there for an hour before she roughed up her hair and went inside again.

I watched her every day for weeks — I saw her make a big show of leaving then sneak to the park and get a Mr Whippy. I saw her run to the end of the road and do some stretches before plonking herself down on the bench and lying, staring at the clouds, and I saw her, when it was raining, check no one was watching then hide behind our hedge. Always the same outfit, this pink shell suit and a towelling sweatband.

I tried to ask my brother about it, about why someone would get dressed up to go jogging and then not actually do it, because I didn’t understand it, but all I got from him was a hungover grunt and an, “I don’t know, do I? Fuck off, Nick.”

I wanted to ask my mum about it, if she knew the lady and what her deal was, but I knew she’d only tell me I shouldn’t be snooping. So one day I went to the park and I waited for her. But when she showed up I didn’t know how to go up to her and ask her the question — there didn’t seem to be an easy in-road to that — so I just watched her amble around looking at the trees while I pretended to be with the other kids who were on the swings. I lay awake most of that night running through different ways to get her to talk to me, came up with a plan I thought was actually fiendishly genius, even though it needed lies stacking up on top of each other and I’ve never been that good under pressure.

I borrowed a dog from the neighbours, claiming it was a school project to do some kind of community service over the break and I’d left it too late to arrange anything, and I hung about until she appeared. The dog worked better than I expected — it made right for her, maybe attracted by her shell suit, I don’t know — and she bent down to stroke it. I said I’d seen her jogging a lot and she must be training for a marathon or something. I was expecting she’d be evasive, having guessed I was on the trail of this huge secret she’d been keeping, that she was a spy and her movements were her way of communicating with her handler, that they had a code based on ice cream and park benches that had been meticulously pre-arranged.

But she just said, “Nah, chuck. Gets me out the house for an hour to myself though, doesn’t it?”

“So you’re not really jogging, then?”

She laughed, kneeling down to play with the dog, getting the knee of her shell suit all grassy in a way she’d probably have to explain later as a trip and stumble owing to poor running form. “At my age people think you need a reason to go out and piss about, you got to be running errands or working towards something, can’t be you just want a moment to think about nothing or watch time slip by.”

“I thought when you were a grown up you could do whatever you wanted.”
I don’t think she had any idea why I was so interested — I don’t think I even knew why I was so interested — but she looked me dead in the eye and she said, “Don’t you ever stop believing that.”

And then she was gone.

Not gone gone — she didn’t move out in mysterious circumstances like she’d existed just to deliver that specific message to me — but September happened and I went on to big school and our schedules didn’t line up anymore. I used to see her from time, though, dropping her kids off at my old school or picking them up. They had riotously big hair and one of them was always crying, and she’d herd them from the car to the gate with a smile on her face, even though it looked like inside she was dying.

I still think about her sometimes, if she ever got bored of the facade and actually started running, if all the time she spent not-running anywhere but the corner built the muscles up to do it anyway without her intending it. I wonder if she’s still got that shell suit and the headband or if they’re in a charity shop somewhere, waiting for someone in Shoreditch to buy them thinking they’re the height of kitsch. I wonder if her kids ever figured out she just needed to get away from them, if she found a partner to take the load off, if she’s still alive, even, and if she is, if she’s still doing exactly the same thing she did that summer. I wonder if she ever heard me on the radio and knew that sometimes I was talking to her directly, that there were days when I was faced with a hard decision that had expectation on the one hand and what I wanted on the other, that in those moments especially she’d float back to me and I’d see her on her knee in the park.

Sounds weird but she became a driving force for me, for figuring out how to navigate existing, how to be who I wanted to be. I never wanted to hate my life so much I pretended to go jogging to get away from it.

Nick stares at the chapter he’s been writing, all the words swimming in front of his eyes until they blur into nonsense. Why is he thinking of that woman?

The numbers at the bottom of the screen tell him that the word count on his book is approaching 100,000. He bites his lip at the thought of both re-reading it all and what he’ll do when he actually reaches the figure, what he’ll do when he has no reason to stay here, cosseted away in a life which doesn’t belong to him.

He closes the file, wastes the rest of the evening trying to do some Christmas shopping on his patchy internet, gets frustrated enough to actually call the customer service number in order to check his order actually happened when the swirling rainbow of doom seemed to be infinite, and slips into bed at ten with Pig and an actual hot water bottle.

“Big day tomorrow,” he says to Pig, and sets the alarm on his phone so he can go and meet Harry at work and they can go and pick up the copies of the paper from the printer.

Pig sticks a wet nose into his neck. He chooses to interpret it as supportive and reaches over her to get the light.

He arrives at the Bakery just as Harry’s shift’s ending, and Barbara hands him a cinnamon swirl before he can even get a real good morning out.

“Better than you get in your Starbucks by a mile, that,” she says, as if Nick was secretly plotting to
open up a franchise next door.

Nick tears off a chunk and feeds it into his mouth. The icing is just the right amount of spicy on his tongue and he chews it down with his eyes closed in appreciation. “You’re spoiling me,” he says.

Having acquired his hat and coat, Harry joins him out in the shop, pinches a bit of his swirl, trading it for a kiss to Nick’s chilled cheek. “Good morning,” he says, and there’s something extra bright about his smile, like he genuinely thinks it is today.

“What we doing, then?” Nick says. “I never been a delivery boy before. Should I have got a bike for the occasion and one of them big satchel things to wear round my neck?”

Harry backs him out of the shop with his hands on Nick’s chest.

His car’s parked round the back, and Nick notes that he’s already flattened all the seats down, making a space that’s probably big enough to get a mid-size sofa in. Harry opens the door and hops in, and when Nick follows suit, he starts the engine and Frank Ocean blares out of the stereo. “This is quite off-message for you,” Nick says.

Harry turns it down and looks out of the window, reversing out of his parking space and onto the road with great care, even though the only thing coming is an ancient tractor that’s puffing out so much smoke it suggests the thing might die before it even gets to them.

“You like him,” Harry says. “I thought I’d give it a proper go.”

Normally Nick would launch into some great lecture about how the fact he didn’t already have everything Frank Ocean ever released was a travesty, but Harry seems embarrassed about it, so Nick just settles back and lets it play, smiling to himself when Harry starts humming along.

They motor through the village — which is even quieter than usual — and over the hill, making a turn that takes them down under a bridge that’s only wide enough for one car at once. Harry takes it slow as he approaches it, the opening totally blind, and Nick grips the handle in his door, trying not to imagine a tanker coming the other way and flattening them.

There’s nothing on the other side at all — at least not in the way of vehicles — there’s a giant inflatable reindeer that’s advertising a car showroom that’s only four miles away and apparently has a range of HP deals that are guaranteed to make anyone feel festive. Beyond that, they wind through a couple of hamlets that are so sleepy they make Middling Slaughter look like Manchester city centre on a Saturday night. They have wooden signposts announcing their names in script that looks like it was done by monks in the fourteenth century and one has an actual duck pond complete with actual ducks and a couple of pensioners chucking actual bread into the reeds. They press on through there to the turning for the A road, marked by a cafe with a couple of porta-loos outside it and a sign saying they’re open for breakfast all day.

“You ever seen anyone actually use one of those?” Nick says, pointing to its blue front.

“No but someone must,” Harry says.

“Reckon they do a nice brunch? Maybe we can go there on Saturday.”

Harry checks his mirror as he switches lanes and puts his foot down. “Rather make my own, thanks,” he says.

The countryside races past the windscreen. Nick reads the signs, running the names of places in his head — there’s Whomping and Willowburgh and Patchstow — and a brown sign denoting tourist
attractions which has something called Saint Peter’s Deer Park and Farmworld. “You been to Farmworld?”

“Everyone has been to Farmworld,” Harry says. “We went every year with school. It’s basically a farm where they get you to pay to feed the pigs and milk a cow.”

“You milked a cow?” Nick looks over at him, trying to picture it.

“Yeah,” Harry says. “It’s kind of weird to be honest.”

“ Weird for you maybe but what do the cows think about it? They’re used to machines and then one day they’ve got someone just fumbling about with their udders.”

“I think it’s the same cow? Like a particularly docile one?”

“That doesn’t make it better, Harry.”

“Take it up with Farmworld,” Harry says. “Believe me I’d have rather been doing PE.”

They turn off at Whomping, and having seen so many signs for the place Nick’s glad he’s actually getting to go there. He straightens up in his seat to get a proper look at the place. It doesn’t disappoint — it mega disappoints — turning out to be basically an industrial estate where the star attraction is a bathroom and kitchen fitting showroom with a trade entrance you can get a truck up to. There’s a wood yard, where stacks of pine and roof eaves compete for space with grand, squat bags of chippings, and there’s a huge sign out front that says there’s a 25% discount on bulk orders of OSB, whatever that is. They pull in next to a tile warehouse. Through the gaping mouth of a door Nick catches sight of two employees dressed in Santa hats wrestling with a trolley full of awful beige floor tiles, the trolley cantering away from them down the slope of the car park.

The printer’s has a neat glass front with a window print announcing all their services in a hilly green and a little counter just inside the door, the only nod to the season snowflakes stuck to the glass, two of which are wilting off. Harry kills the engine and gets out, doesn’t wait for Nick to follow before he pushes inside and whacks the bell on the desk, shouting, “Hello Christine,” over the top of its ring.

A woman dressed in a fleece the same colour as the window print and Christmas tree tinsel earrings appears from the back, greeting Harry with a huge smile. “Bang on time,” she says. She shoots a glance at Nick, eyes sweeping over his face, moving on, coming back, in that way that Nick’s learnt to recognise as someone trying to place his face and then questioning if they’ve got it right or if he’s just someone who looks a bit like Nick Grimshaw.

Sometimes, usually when he’d had a few, he used to pretend he was just someone who looks like Nick Grimshaw — someone would come over for a picture and knowing he’d look like he was off his face, he’d do an impression of a posh Londoner and pretend he was annoyed it was happening again, including one notable occasion when Daisy heard him do it and busted him, declaring, “Why are you pretending not to be you, Grimm?”

Nick’s been kind of dreading it — and longing for it to happen so he can get it out of the way with — someone asking for a picture while Harry’s with him or shouting something at him in the street. He smiles at Christine in case she’s the person, but obviously she’s more of the type just to tell her friends about it later, because she checks the computer and says, “Payment went through and everything. Load you up, shall we?”

They wait outside, hugging themselves against the chill, while Christine goes around the side of the
building to fetch their order. She reappears with a wonky trolley loaded with bundles of paper, each one wrapped in what looks like layers and layers of layers of cling film, with a stout cardboard carton on the bottom. It takes all three of them to heave the first one into the back of Harry’s Range Rover and Harry shoves it right in as far as it’ll go, putting all his weight on one leg and leaning right in to get it to move. They slide the next one in next to it, even though Nick’s arms protest at holding up his corner, and it’s only when the final one goes in he catches a glimpse of the front cover. It’s all distorted through the wrapping but it gives him a little shiver anyway, the sight of the words and Harry’s picture, all done up in black and white and red at the top, by Harry Styles and Nick Grimshaw underneath the headline.

“Perfect,” Harry says, slamming the boot shut. He claps Christine on the arm and offers her a jovial thanks and a merry Christmas and jerks his head for Nick to get back in.

Reaching for his seatbelt, Nick says, “Where to first, then?” and Harry rummages in his pocket and comes back with a map.

It’s badly printed — looks like a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy — but has stars squiggled on it in salmon highlighter pen. There must be a dozen of them. “All these?” Nick says.

Harry answers by pulling out of the carpark, taking the map back from Nick and gripping it between his teeth. Once they’re back on the A road he takes it out again and rests it on the dash between them.

Frank Ocean’s still singing his heart out about first times and new feels. It makes an odd soundtrack, and Harry must think so too, because halfway to the first stop he tells Nick there’s a compilation of festive tunes in the glovebox. Nick ferrets about for it, finds a CD that has holly and what are possibly supposed to be mince pies doodled on the face of it. He swaps Frank for it, waits for it to spin up and the first track to whir into life. It’s Mariah. “Strong start,” Nick says.

“It’s all downhill from here.”

“Should’ve just made a CD of just Mariah.”

“I like the Mud one, though, and the one about the drummer boy.”

“Like I said, should’ve just made a CD of just Mariah.”

“What, you going to go off me because of my taste in Christmas music?”

Nick leans back against his seat, stretching his feet into the foot well while Mariah warbles on about a Christmas tree. “Depends on if the Darkness is on here,” he says, and Harry laughs.

The first stop on the list is the out of town Asda. They pile out in the car park — which is deserted except for a handful of cars and a mini bus painted with clouds and labelled with a message about Christianity and not losing hope in the will of the lord. Harry flips the boot open and extracts from his pocket a scary looking penknife with about a hundred attachments, all of which look moderately terrifying. He opens it out to reveal a little knife with a serrated edge, and saws away at the packing wrap until he’s got a stack of papers unpeeled. He hands a dozen or so to Nick, Nick catching them with effort because they’re heavier and slipperier than he was expecting. He leans back to cradle them against his chest. “What am I doing with these?”

Harry grabs a stack of his own. “Follow me,” he says.

Outside the bit of Asda you can nip in to just get fags from, there’s a waiting holder with the paper’s old logo and type face on the side. Harry drops his bundle in, then takes Nick’s, settling them on the
top. He pauses to look at the cover, the way Mrs Whitstable’s smiling out at him in front of the vase of wintry foliage and flowers and the headline tells anyone passing that a Christmas miracle has happened. In the side bar, it says *Yule be glad you read our gift guide!*

Nick sees something flicker across Harry’s face as he runs his hand over it. It’s not quite pride, but something like it, like he’s allowing himself just the smallest pat on the back.

“Looks good,” Nick says, and touches the back of his neck to bring him in for a quick hug.

Harry sighs against him, nodding, and they walk back to the car for another load to fill the container right to the top. On the other side of the fag display there’s the usual Mirror and Sun and Mail — Christmas misery for shoppers as rail strikes continue, a cabinet minister talking shit about immigration figures, a story boasting all the latest seedy details of a footballer’s affair, and some scandal from *X Factor* which Nick can tell even without reading it has been manufactured to improve the figures. Nick never thought he’d say it but maybe Pat had a point, after all.

After that, they call in at a few local newsagents with names like Bob’s News and Margaret’s Corner Shop and Harry hands over the number of copies they’ve ordered or helps arrange them into the stacks. They do two Spas in neighbouring villages and call in to leave some in the racks of leaflets about local places of interest before pulling up outside the parish church. It’s a cute little stone thing with a stubby spire, and Nick can easily imagine tossing confetti into the air at a wedding here. Harry tells him it’s the one where the vicar has taken to Twitter to try and get the roof fixed. They dodge a bucket catching drips from a leak somewhere above on their way out, and while Harry’s not looking, Nick leaves thirty quid on a collection plate and crosses himself with a nod at the altar.

Their route takes them on a tour of places Nick would never have seen otherwise — tiny little emporiums of lost arts like tobacco weighing and pipe selling, a place where people take their shoes and boots to be actually repaired, an off license that sells nothing that Nick recognises but has an entire wall devoted to local gins. Nick was expecting indifference or grudging acceptance from the owners, but everyone greets Harry like he’s dropping off an actual Christmas present, and by the time they’re down to their last stack and heading back into familiar territory, Nick feels cosy, like he’s had three mugs of mulled wine.

They call in at Niall’s farm shop just after the sun’s disappeared for the day. The cows are trudging their way through the yard and into the barn under the stewardship of Niall and another guy in a flat cap and wellies.

“How’re you there?” Niall says, lifting his crutch in greeting.

“Good. Leave these for you, yeah?” Harry says, waving a copy of the paper back at him.

Niall gives him a thumbs up and hobbles after a straggling cow, shooing it back in the right direction. Inside, the shop’s had a Christmas make-over, with a stack of hampers taking up half the usual floor space, a giant sign with a cardboard elf telling anyone that they can take a pre-made one or arrange to have one to their exact specifications specially made for no extra cost. Nick fingers a cheese selection while Harry drops the bundle of papers down on the counter and slices the binding off with his pen knife.

“Nearly done,” he says.

Nick grabs a brie and leaves a tenner tucked under Niall’s laptop since he can’t find a price on it.

The last stop is the local supermarket with the dangerously hilly car park, and just as Nick’s getting out, his phone goes.
He gets it out, and noticing the name on the front, he slides to answer. “Hey Pix.”

Harry frowns at him in question and Nick covers the microphone and tells Harry he’ll be there in a minute. In his ear, Pixie’s talking a hundred miles an hour about how glad she is to finally have gotten hold of him, lurches through a dozen questions giving him no time to answer before she says, “New year, you’re still coming, right?”

The boot opens and in the wing mirror, Nick sees Harry hauling the stack of papers to the edge of the boot, gathering them up where they’ve slid from a nice neat pile to a fan.

“Yeah, ‘course,” Nick says. “S’all booked isn’t it.”

In truth, he hadn’t so much forgotten he made plans as decided not to think about it. It wasn’t worth the worry lines, he thought, he’d just let time run away and come up with an excuse closer to the time if he needed it.

Harry glances at him in the mirror, then disappears, carrying the papers up the ramp and into the shop. He comes back and huffs dramatically as he hauls the next stack to the edge of the boot to undo.

“I’m in the middle of something, can I call you back later? Or email you or something?” Nick says.

“Soon, though?” Pixie says.


He darts around Harry and opens the shop door. “Sorry,” Nick says. “It’s the only place I can really take a call.”

Harry drops the remaining stack of papers on the counter. “There you go,” he says, to the woman behind it who has never been anything other than stern to Nick.

“Fly out, this will,” she says, grinning.

“Merry Christmas.”

Harry ducks under Nick’s arm and goes round to the driver side, hauling himself in. He leans back on his seat, staring at the ceiling of the car while he catches his breath. “Who was it?” Harry says. He keeps his head tilted back but looks over. “On the phone.”

“Just a friend.”

Harry murmurs like that’s not really an answer, so Nick adds, “We’re going away together for new year. She just wanted to check I hadn’t forgotten.”

“Oh,” Harry says. He looks away again and Nick’s chest goes tight.

“Do it every year,” Nick says. “We booked it ages ago, otherwise — ”

“No, it’s fine,” Harry says. “I’ll be working in the pub, anyway.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

It makes Nick want to eat the entire brie on whatever moderately fusty crackers he can find in the
cupboard, but instead he says, “What time we leaving for this Christmas market thing, then? Your mum promised me real chestnuts and overpriced mulled wine.”

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There are things Nick has always been able to get excited about — a new range of cushions at Liberty, a diet promising massive inch loss with minimal life adjustments, and Justin Bieber generally — but he never pictured himself as the kind of person who’d get genuinely hyped about a Christmas market. Granted, that was back in the days when he had plenty of choices and in his new, pared down life, watching two pigeons fight over the lid of a discarded mince pie has started to qualify as entertainment.

He pulls into the pub car park and leaves the engine running so he can take full advantage of the heater blasting him in the face. He texts Harry are u ready?? and a handful of appropriate seasonal emojis — the wine glass, a Christmas tree, four Santas, and a cookie that will have to do since there’s no actual Christmas pudding emoji — leans in to the windscreen to watch the lights above the pub go off by way of reply. He reaches into the backseat to rearrange Pig’s blanket. “You be good,” he says. “No eating a sausage and puking it up on Anne, you hear? I’m trying to make a good impression.”

Pig lifts a baleful eyebrow, only looks up properly when she sees Harry waving at her through the window.

He’s got Basil tucked under his arm in a smart little dog jacket, and behind him, Anne’s mostly smile and giant faux fur hat. Nick reaches across and opens the door for them, and Anne slides in next to Pig.

“Evening,” she says. “Hope you got your thermals on.”

“I look incredible in them,” Nick says, and as Harry slides into the passenger seat he glances across like he’s not sure whether or not Nick’s joking. He leans in to give him a peck on the cheek anyway. “Everyone good to go?”

He flicks on the radio since the compilation of hip-hop he was listening to isn’t exactly mum-friendly.

Annie’s laugh booms out. “And what was his name, Fincham? The DJ we saw in Ibiza who did the really amazing remix of Disclosure and then fell off the box he was standing on?”

Turning it off would just draw attention, so Nick presses his lips together and focuses on navigating his way between the potholes that mark the way out onto the road, pretending he’s looking for black ice and that’s why it needs his full attention. It’s not that he’s been avoiding it, the radio, more that in the early days of his departure he’d sometimes chance upon a former colleague saying his name and it made him feel like a ghost at his own wake. Luckily it’s the hottest record up next so there’s not much chance she’s about to lurch into an anecdote.

The market’s in a bigger town it takes them twenty minutes through a forest and over a series of nerve-jangling hills to get to, but it greets them like a postcard from Dickens. Some of the shop fronts are all lit up to show off their displays of fake snow, glistening berries, and frolicking foxes, and in others, candy canes and automated laughing Santas jostle for attention while bundles of real foliage
with actual mistletoe are draped over the doorways like scarves.

“It’s just down here,” Harry says, pointing, somewhat ominously, down a side street with no lighting whatsoever to what appears to be a derelict cemetery. “You can park on the left.” Graves are bursting free from the ground and the lead angel manning the gate has lost its head. He must catch Nick’s doubtful grimace because he adds, “Yeah that’s why it’s always free.”

Nick pulls into what’s clearly not a parking space under a gnarled old oak with branches that look like the shadows of oncoming doom in a horror film. “Festive,” he says.

They arrange themselves quickly on the not-pavement and march back out to the vibrancy of the high street. Not far away there’s music and the burble of laughter and carolling, and they follow it, stopping a few times on the way so Harry can look in the window of a cake shop and declare it’s not as good as their window and then so Anne can coo at a handbag in a boutique. Harry takes a picture of the latter when she’s not looking on the pretence that Basil’s sniffing something, and Nick smiles and points down the road so Anne doesn’t see.

The market itself is straight off a cake-topper — little huts like a series of stables where there might once have been a manger going spare for any passing deities to deposit a stray baby in, all with fairy lights entwined along the eaves. Each one’s selling different Christmas fodder — gingerbread shaped into teddy bears and houses and hearts iced with the top 10 most popular names, a candle maker who’s hung their wares by extra-long wicks to show off all the colours and the burn time, and a clothes stall with more Fair Isle than Nick’s seen even in Ikea.

They wander down the first row together, Harry bumping into Nick’s shoulder until Nick wraps an arm around him. He’s never been very good at this kind of thing, unless he’s three sheets to the wind, but it’s easier than he expected it to be, to be here with Harry looking to all intents and purposes like his boyfriend.

“What d’you reckon, for Gemma?” Anne says. She holds up two pairs of earrings and Harry considers each one in turn.

“The purple?” he says. “They go with her hair?”

“Hmmm.” Anne shakes them, then puts them back, and starts looking at gloves on the neighbouring stall instead.

“These are nice,” Nick says, picking up something with stars that climb up the curve of your ear. “You said she’s into science and stuff? They’re constellations, look.”

Harry takes them and holds them against his ear, tilting his head so he can see how they look in the tiny little mirror on the top of the display. “Suit me?”

“Everything suits you,” Nick says, and checks Anne’s distracted by the cable knit kittens before he plants a kiss in Harry’s hair, just where it’s sticking out under his woolly hat, “because you’re bloody gorgeous, it’s annoying.”

Harry grins, hands the earrings to the woman behind the counter, picking up a matching necklace with a miniature galaxy in a pendant. He gets both of them in a smart little gift box with reindeer hooves all over it and a bright red ribbon. “I want at least half the credit for that,” Nick says, as Harry stashes them in his pocket. “Anyone want a mulled wine?”

They see two women Anne knows from the local Chamber of Commerce on the way to the bar, so Nick takes over ordering and they wait for her by one of the little tables. The cups all have a painted
pattern of houses and Christmas carol lyrics swirling through a snowy night sky, and Nick takes a photo of two of them nestled together against a blurred out background. It looks quite arty so he actually posts it, ignores the messages from his friends about him being alive which pop up immediately.

Harry jostles his leg with his foot. “What d’you want, then?” he says. “For Christmas?”

“Like as a present?” Nick says and Harry nods. “I’ve been led to believe the element of surprise is kind of a thing?”

“I know but most people drop hints and you haven’t.”

“Maybe I have and you just missed them.” Harry rolls his eyes and gives Nick another kick. “Get me anything, I’m not really bothered.”

“So one of those tea light holders made of salt, then?”

“Anything but those.”

Anne extricates herself from a goodbye hug and joins them, wrapping her hands around her mug. “Busy this year,” she says.

They exchange small talk about the various offerings they can see and what kind of food they want to get later, the mulled wine steam rising up to meet the fog forming on their breath. Nick promises Pig a sausage if she’s good and Harry tells Basil not to get any ideas. Then he drains his mug. “Right,” he says, “I need to go off on my own for a bit.”

Anne makes a big show of telling him not to get her anything expensive but there’s practically handbag-shaped hearts in her eyes as she grins and kisses Harry on the cheek. He walks away through the crowd blowing kisses to them both. “You got things to get too, love?” she says.

“Few bits and pieces.”

In truth Nick did most of his last night. Almost everything is being delivered already gift-wrapped direct to its intended recipient so he just needs something for Harry, really, and he spotted the perfect thing when they came in. “Meet you back here in an hour?”

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Nick stands with his bags between his knees like an emperor penguin guarding its eggs. The smell of hotdogs and caramelised onions twirls through the air, making him and Pig make approximately the same face, dripping with longing. He waves at Anne as she appears through the crowd, wearing bags of her own like bangles on both arms. “You’ve been busy,” he says. She’s red of nose and bright-eyed and there’s so much Harry in her smile, Nick feels a surge of fondness for her that’s been entirely absent from his previous interactions of the parental variety.

“I can’t resist a good sales pitch.”

“You’ve not found Harry, though?”

“Thought he’d be with you.”
Anne looks around, trying to pick his face out of the milling jumpers and festive hats, before getting her phone out. She tugs her mittens off and dials his number — actually knows it off by heart, which is a show of devotion in this day and age. Nick’s mum has his written on a Post-It that keeps losing its stickiness and drifting to become irretrievable between the fridge and the washing machine, meaning mostly when she wants to ring him from home, she has to ring someone else first to get the number. Then she writes it on a Post-It and it’s the first thing she mentions when he answers, and the whole thing continues like a very niche circle of hell.

“No answer,” Anne says, and fires off a text, her long snow-flake painted nails clicking on the phone screen.

“He’s probably got distracted by rival mince pies,” Nick says, but he gets his phone out as well and checks to see if he’s got any messages. He does: fourteen from Aimee asking when he’s going to stop ghosting literally everyone and two from Annie asking if he’s still interested in going to that Christmas Eve thing he asked for guest list to because it’s almost at maximum capacity and she doesn’t want him to miss out. There are others too, from his agent about his book and from the PA at his management company asking for the password to something, and one from Zane Lowe which is either a case of pocket emojis or a very specific kind of come on. He ignores them and fires a text at Harry, telling him to get his arse back to where they had mulled wine before Nick’s toes freeze off.

When neither of them get a reply and ten minutes pass, Anne’s face turns from festive to frowning. “Do you think he’s all right?”

“Yeah,” Nick says. “He can’t have gone far, can he? Why don’t you stay here and get another mulled wine and I’ll go and look for him?”

Anne nods and Nick steps out from round his bags, transferring their safe-keeping with a mutually-understood gesture familiar to anyone who’s popped for a wee on a train and left their possessions with a stranger. He and Pig do a quick loop of the outer stalls, past the old fashioned black kiln thing selling the fabled actual chestnuts and the place with the reindeer antlers, around both of the stalls selling ye olde sweets and cinder toffee, pauses for a moment because Harry mentioned liking it at some point. There’s a guy dressed as a penguin collecting for homeless people, so Nick hands him a couple of quid and asks if he’s seen anyone tallish with a pink hat and slightly too much hair.

“You mean him?” the penguin says. He turns, beak obscuring his face, and gestures with one of his wings towards the stall where a hog is slowly pirouetting on a spike in front of a crowd of people lightly watering at the mouth.

Harry’s asleep on a hay bale, bags around his feet, his head resting on an inflatable polar bear that’s advertising the beer on sale next door. Basil’s sitting in front of him, his little chest puffed out underneath his jacket as if he’ll take off at the wrist the hand of anyone who so much as thinks about touching him.

Nick battles a grin, then snaps a picture. He picks his way through the crowd to Harry and kneels down in front of him, greeting Basil with a jostle of his ears. He’s expecting Harry to wake up in that way that people usually do when their old forest-dweller instincts tell them they’re being watched.

Harry doesn’t stir, though, and Nick’s not sure what to do. He hates spluttering awake in front of people — always resents the person responsible a little bit — but he can’t just leave him here all night.

Nick touches Harry’s knee, stroking over the denim, pressing just hard enough for him to feel.

“Wake up, love,” he says. “It’s me.”

It takes him three tries and an additional arm rub but eventually Harry’s eyelids flutter and his mouth
opens and emits a low, grumbling, “Whaaaaaaaa — ”

“Cheating on me already?” Nick says. “And with an inflatable polar bear and everything. Is there no such thing as standards anymore?”

Harry eases upright, eyes and brain whirring until he fixes on the thing he had been using as a pillow. “Oh,” he says, sitting fully upright, hand going to his head to push his hat about in confusion. “How long have I been…?”

“Long enough of your mum to buy half the market.”

“Oh.” A slow smile creeps over his face and he reaches for the hand Nick abandoned on his knee. “Sorry.”

“If you were too knackered you could’ve said.”

“I’m fine.” He looks away, battening down a yawn, rubs over Nick’s knuckles. Nick links their fingers, which Pig takes as her cue to try and climb Harry’s leg like a stepladder.

“You couldn’t have done that two minutes ago when it would’ve been useful?” Nick says, but Harry ruffles the fur on the top of her head. “Come on,” he says. “I promised her a hotdog and looks like you could do with some fuel, too.”

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When they make it back to the car, there’s a fine sheen of glittering frost over the windscreen and they’re all stamping their feet and clapping their hands together to stave off the biting cold. Harry spent most of the walk back leaning into Nick’s shoulder, muttering about being frozen until Nick just wrapped both arms around him.

They have to battle to get all their purchases into the boot, and even then they won’t fit and some get rammed into the foot wells, where Basil makes an immediate grab for the first thing he sees that’s gift-wrapped. “Leave it out, you,” Nick says, and tucks the bag instead onto the parcel shelf — which might be the first time he’s ever use it for its intended purpose.

They decide that for Basil-herding reasons it might be best if Harry gets in the back, and with staggering predictability, he falls asleep pretty much as soon as Nick pulls away from underneath the scary oak, Basil firmly clamped in place on his knees.

The dark is that all-consuming kind that Nick’s read about in novels about folk who stumble unsuspecting into the country, and he turns the radio down even though it’s a Piano Session from someone he actually really likes so he can navigate the hill without plunging them off the unmarked roadside to their untimely deaths. Anne hums along with the cover version — which is Adele — and Nick normally might launch into an anecdote, but it’s not really the moment for his by the way I know her speech.

“There’s so many stars here,” he says, instead.

She glances across at him with a smile. “Be careful, you’ll get used to it.”
There are two of the regulars standing outside with pint glasses when they get back to the pub, even though the place is shut up for the night, only the bar pumps glowing in the dark inside. Pig’s asleep with her head on the only bit of Harry’s thigh that’s not occupied by a recalcitrant Basil and Nick nods at them in the mirror. “Shame to wake them, init.”

They have to, though, and once they’re roused, they all trundle up the stairs with Harry yawning into his sleeve. A Christmas wreath has appeared on the flat’s front door, and into it someone has tucked an envelope. Anne smiles as she retrieves it.

The lounge seems especially tiny with them all and all their bags in it — Anne’s take up most of the sofa and Pig jumps up with them to try and make some sort of nest.

“Anyone want a cocoa?” Anne says.

Harry shakes his head and Nick does too.

“Are you staying?” she says.

Nick looks to Harry, who digs his fingers into Nick’s arm and tugs him towards his bedroom.

“Apparently.”

They both wish Anne goodnight and she says she’ll do water and a bit of food for Pig and Basil, Harry barely bothering to listen as he backs into his room, dragging Nick with him, and closes the door. He doesn’t even fumble for the switch for the fairy lights over the bed like he normally does, just tugs off his jumper and his t-shirt with it and crawls across the duvet and out of his jeans at the same time. He pulls the duvet and blankets he’s got strewn on top of it up around him and burrows down.

Nick shivers as he sheds his clothes and slides in next to him. The sheets are freezing against his skin — Harry even smells cold — and he bunches the covers up higher, making a wall over their heads as he drags him in for a kiss. He’s never been quite as painfully aware as he is in that moment what a noise kissing makes, takes him right back to being a kid and his sister being on a date, hearing them outside saying goodbye and the awful not-silence, feeling embarrassed, not wanting to know she did that. In the kitchen Anne’s still making some sort of snack, humming a Christmas carol they heard at one of the stalls and chattering to Basil and Pig.

“Other night,” Harry says, pressing his body up against Nick’s, “we never got to — ”

“Thought you were tired?”

“ ‘M tired, not too tired.” His mouth’s all warm and soft and smiley against Nick’s, then dangerously persuasive on his neck, finding the secret pathway down it that makes Nick want to squirm closer and away all at once.

Knowing his fingers must still have chill in them Nick runs his hand over Harry’s side just to make him writhe, goes all the way up to where the necklace he always wears dangles heated by his skin and just faintly glints in the dark. He rolls the cross between his fingers, but given some of the things he’s thinking that’s probably a touch irreverent, so he settles for kissing Harry again and sliding his fingers up into his hair, tangling them there until they’re warm as his scalp. “What d’you want, love?”

Harry murmurs against his lips; Nick likes to think it’s for the word love, not merely the suggestion of orgasm pending.
“What we were going to do the other night. Can’t stop thinking about it.”

He breaks away, eyes closing for a second before he offers Nick a long, slow blink, sliding his hand under the pillow. He comes back with a vibrator. As they go it’s quite a nice looking one — matte black, not too big and nicely tapered rather than one of those ones that has a biologically infeasible number of veins. It’s a huge improvement on the green monstrosity. He holds it between them like he’s not quite sure what the next move is.

“What we were going to do the other night. Can’t stop thinking about it.”

“I do it all the time. She just thinks I’m shaving.”

“Your mum’s still up,” Nick whispers. Regardless, he skims his fingertips over its shaft, and there’s something about doing that to a dick whether it’s real or otherwise that’s always made him hard quicker than anything, quicker than being touched himself. He meets Harry’s gaze.

“Your mum definitely does not think you’re shaving, late at night, in your room, especially not now you’ve dragged me in here.”

“When I hear… similar noises, that’s what I think. Yep. She’s doing her legs again.”

Nick head butts him in the shoulder as if it might dislodge the thought. “Oh god.”

“We’ve got a nice circle of double-ended denial going on, don’t ruin it.”

Nick splutters a laugh into his collarbone, but from mirth comes stillness, nothing in the dark but suggestion and the way they’re both grinning, semi-coyly, like they can’t both tell the other’s hard for the idea.

“Yeah?” Harry says.

Nick lets his hand slide up to trace a pattern on the side of Harry’s neck with his fingertips, and Harry looks up at him, air turning thick around his gaze. “Yeah.”

Nick leans in, watching Harry’s lips part in expectation. He hesitates, close enough for Harry to have his breath in his mouth, grinning when he gets a frustrated sigh and a dig of Harry’s toes to his leg to urge him closer. Brushing his lips over Harry’s, Nick takes the vibrator, and Harry opens up a little more, mouth hot with promises. “You got to try and keep it down though or I’m never going to be able to look Anne in the face ever again.”

Harry smiles against his mouth, brackets Nick’s cheeks with his hands, and this kiss takes a turn for the more involved, tongues teasing and retreating, starting again.

Just beyond the door Anne says, “Night night,” and Nick pulls away, grimacing.

They both hold still, waiting for her bedroom door to close, breathing at each other while she shuffles around on the other side of the wall. When the bed springs creak and things go quiet, Harry rolls over to retrieve the lube from the rickety chest of drawers next to the bed. He shimmies out of his boxers and tosses them into the corner of the room, all the tiredness gone from his face by the time he flattens on his back. His expression dances as Nick brushes his fingers over his chest, just lingering on his nipples, little eager noises falling out of the corners of his mouth.

Placating him with a kiss, Nick takes the bottle. It’s cold and he rolls it between his palms to try and warm it up a bit, rearranging the blankets over his shoulders to make a tent as he leans over Harry. He nudges his jaw with his nose, licking at the soft skin just underneath, revelling in the contrast between it and the harsh angle of his jaw itself. He gets a noseful of Harry’s coconut conditioner and his aftershave, and it’s so deeply intoxicating he closes his eyes to try and wrap the moment up like a
present he’ll keep for himself.

When their mouths meet again it’s with something gratifyingly close to a groan.

“Shhhhhhh.”

Harry’s trying to be quiet is a lot like messy kissing, it turns out, but Nick doesn’t think time will help any with that. The lube squelches as Nick squeezes some out onto his fingers, and Harry bends his knee up, shifts closer, keenness in his eyes and urgency in the fingers he clutches Nick’s arm with. His hair is properly haywire, disarrayed with static and writhing about, and Nick wants to think it’s ridiculous but god help him, it makes him want to give Harry six orgasms before sunrise and possibly make him some kind of cake with his name and a heart on for breakfast. He tries to hide it scuffing Harry’s temple with a kiss as his hand wanders down Harry’s body, careful when he gets there, just letting Harry feel the brush of his knuckles and the tease of the pads of his fingers.

Those same little breathy noises he was making before fall out of his mouth and Nick chases them, nipping at his lip. Harry snakes an arm around his neck and pulls him closer, his knee falling away to the side to give Nick more room. His breath hitches as Nick actually slips a finger inside him, and Nick watches the bob of Harry’s throat as he swallows.

“All right?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Harry says. It comes out all short and gaspy and makes Nick want to die.

He gets more lube — he really needs to talk to Harry at some point when they’re not actually in the middle of this about more suitable brands — the way Harry’s eyes close sending his stomach on some kind of sky dive. “Can you — ” Harry pats around the sheets.

“Eager.”

Nick scrabbles for the vibrator he tucked under the corner of the pillow so it wouldn’t roll away at a crucial moment, because he’s been there before and nothing ruins the moment quite like sliding out of bed and getting on the floor with your arse in the air for all the wrong reasons. He gives it a quick coating of lube, thumbs over the on switch to remind himself where it is, but doesn’t turn it on just yet, drags it down the crease where Harry’s thigh meets his hip.

Harry fastens his fingers around Nick’s wrist and guides him back to where he wants.

Smiling at his impatience, Nick lets the fingers around his wrist guide the pace and the pressure, and he can tell when Harry relaxes because he lets go of his hand and clutches Nick’s hair instead. It gives him that kind of tunnel vision he gets sometimes when he’s having sex, his focus slipping from the scratchy weight of the blankets and thoughts about if they’re making too much noise to the way the little muscles at the side of Harry’s mouth give away the groan he’s on the edge of before he tips over it.

The lube squelches and neither of them even laughs. Harry’s fingers skid down his back to pull Nick in, and Nick buries his face in the warmth of Harry’s neck, blotting out the discomfort from gripping the base of the vibe so tightly and not slacking off the rhythm. It’s always been this which startled him about being with someone — not the mechanics of it, but the way when you’re really close to someone you can feel their bones and their skin and all the bits that make them human. Intimacy is things like noses and jaws and ears touching, the sigh someone makes when you breathe against the tiny hairs on the side of their face. He can’t get enough of it. He flicks the switch and it doesn’t take long until Harry’s coming, his teeth clamped down on Nick’s ear and all Nick’s thoughts about any life but this a trillion miles away.
The Ghost of DJs Past

When I first started on the radio, how you got on was by being the one who’d take the shifts everyone else complained about — but I liked it, being on early breakfast when no one was up. I especially liked a bank holiday or over Christmas. It felt special. It wasn’t just because we’ve decided as a society those times are special — and it certainly wasn’t because the BBC went wild on festive decor to set the tone, one year we had a Christmas tree so cheap I got a full on static shock every time I went within four feet of it — it was because it felt like being part of a secret little club. The building would always be quiet instead of its usual hubbub, so quiet that if I’d wanted to, I could’ve leapt on top of a desk and danced across it like a kid trapped in a department store in a film. There was a serenity to it, to just being in the studio on your own talking to whoever was out there.

Back when I was a student, when I did my first radio show, this producer called Mike (who had the longest legs I’d ever seen on a real person) told me to just imagine one person and speak directly to them. I fancied him and his endless legs something chronic so I took it to heart, and it turned out to be good advice. Over the years, especially at Christmas, I developed a bunch of imaginary listeners — a nice young someone in a roll neck jumper who’s just switched the show on for company while they lick the envelopes on cards they’ve filled with things they hope come across as sincere, a harassed sprout farmer trying to get everything picked and off to Tesco’s, a kid working in a bakery in a Santa hat, bone tired and singing along to Mariah Carey to stay awake. It was only years later that I realised I was always picturing people who were alone. No matter how many callers we had who rang in from a car full of pals on their way to somewhere exciting or how many office workers wanted a shout out for their colleagues, I never imagined anyone listening was part of any kind of collective. These people, these always alone people, they were real to me, and I started to feel responsible for, if not their happiness, keeping them going.

On my last day, before the last show, I couldn’t sleep. So I just got in the car and went in. I got a coffee and walked around like the last survivor of an apocalypse. I didn’t dance on any tables, but I ran my fingers over each and every one. Here had sat so many DJs who’d meant something to someone they’d never even met; I took a picture of a building empty of everything but the ghosts of words spoken into the ether and popular songs played to death.

Then I did my final broadcast and I tried to keep it light. But I thought of all the people I’d spoken to over the years — how they were doing with that thing they spilled their guts about — all the people who’d texted when they had no one to listen and who’d listened when they had no one to text. I thought of those always alone people. I wondered what I’d do without them in my head, giving me a reason to paste a smile on. I’d been as alone as any of them, only I didn’t realise it until the on air light went out.

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“Christmas always seems so far away and then happens all at once, don’t it?”

The postman — who looks like a mix between Richard O’Brien and a guy who used to serve in Nick’s local — stares back, noncommittal. “Just squiggle in the box if you’d be so kind.”

“Right.” Nick does a bad forgery of his own signature and staggers back inside with the package. He struggles it over to the kitchen table to join the heap he’s been assembling like some kind of squirrel with internet. “Last one,” he says, even though Pig’s busy drawing patterns in the fog on the window
with her own nose.

Fleetingly the other day he missed the lights of Oxford and Regent Street, the hustle and bustle of trying to get everything done; but then he remembered the row he had last year with his not-boyfriend in Liberty, the one he had the year before with George and Pixie in Selfridges, the one the year before that where he annoyed Aimee so badly she stormed off leaving an avalanche of throw cushions in her wake. He’s never gone shopping with anyone at Christmas and it not resulted in a massive row. Except Harry now, he supposes. Does it count if one of you was asleep for most of it?

He slices the Sellotape on the largest box and divests it of its excess packaging. It has that new Mac smell and he runs his fingers over the logo on the front. It’s too much, probably, but he figures since he won’t be there to see Harry open it he can probably handle it. He goes through the others — gift sets he bought for various aunties containing favourite perfumes and shower gels, fancy hand cream — ticking everyone off one by one until all he’s got left is a scarf he liked, assigned to no one in particular.

He doesn’t think about what’s not there, the gift he’d always stress about most, the one for the person whose approval he always craved which now will never be given. He twists the star-shaped card that dangles from the hand cream before telling himself not to be sentimental and get on with the wrapping. He looks around for the paper. Where on earth did he —

He should’ve got a tree. Get Christmas stuff, whack it under the tree, then you know where everything is when you need it. But he’s been spending so much time at Harry’s, it didn’t really seem worth it.

Wrapping paper. Nick looks through the bundle of things on the table. How could he have missed such a vital part of the equation off the list? He double checks he hasn’t just stowed it somewhere out of dachshund reach but there’s none on top of the wardrobes or in the cellar or wedged in the beams where they’re cracked in the kitchen.

“Losing it,” he mutters, and reaches for his scarf and Pig’s lead.

The walk to the village is peppered with people saying hello, and he likes it, a bit, being a familiar face but in an entirely different way to how he used to be. Here, he’s Nick who hangs out with Harry rather than Nick who was on telly that time in a pair of egregiously terrible trousers. It feels looser, less like he needs to breathe in and pretend to be other than he is.

He pushes the door to The Stationery Shop open. He’s always wondered about it, how it manages to stay afloat in the era of Staples and Paperchase, and inside, it’s all fountain pens and brown paper and smells of freshly-licked stamps. He manages to find some gift wrap with a pattern of moose and mistletoe, and he thinks it’ll amuse Harry if he writes Merry Christmoose so gets enough of that to wrap his gifts in and something less eccentric with snowflakes on for everyone else.

He calls in at the Bakery, where Barbara announces, “It’s your friend, the Nick one,” like an accusation and Harry glances over from where he’s frisbeeing tomatoes into rolls.

“You got time for a mince pie break?” Nick says.

“Nope. Up to our necks in sandwich orders.” Harry’s brow furrows and for a second, he looks just like the first time Nick ran into him here. Like his own twin.

Nick waves off his disappointment with a, “Never mind, then. See you later.”

“Will you? I thought you were heading to your mum’s?”
“I’ll pop in, ‘fore I go.”

“Oh,” Harry says, and meets his eye properly this time, with a smile that teeters just on the edge of suggestive. “Ok.”

Nick lets Pig lead him down the stream on the way back. The trees are much sparser than when Nick arrived — which he guesses makes sense, seasons change and all that. Most years, he misses the subtle shift from autumn into winter, the way leaves go from pretty orange to brown to pooling in a crinkling heap at the feet of the trees. Maybe in London it happens faster, or he’s just too busy to really look at things. Here, there’s time to appreciate the minute differences that occur in the landscape one week to the next, the way the hedgerows decorate themselves with red berries as soon as the orange leaves have disappeared as if to make up for their loss.

There’d be time to properly miss someone in a place like this. Nick’s not sure he likes it, as a thought.

When he gets in, his toes feel as if they’ve frozen into one chunk of foot rather than being their usual moving parts. He hops around the lounge with his scarf still on to defrost, puts some festive music on his phone, and builds himself a nest in front of the fire so he can wrap his presents. He’s barely settled when Pig makes off with the Sellotape.

“Give over,” he says, and reaches for it, but she yanks it away, growling at him as if pointing out if he didn’t want her to wrestle him for sticky tape, that ring toy he got her as a puppy was a serious error.

He ends up having to get her a bone to keep her busy. He does Harry’s big gift first in case she’ll only stay distracted for one. He goes with a pun on the gift tag, hesitates on what to sign with his name before just going with Nick and a couple of kisses. He does the other bits and bobs he’s brought for him next, arranging them all in a bag so he can take them over later like he said he would before he leaves.

Not that he’s leaving leaving. He made that very clear the other night, after dinner, when Harry had his foot halfway up Nick’s thigh and most of the way to giving Nick a new sock fetish. “Couple of days,” he said, “max. It’s not a big deal, is it?”

He moves on to tying ribbon around the jars of chutney he made with Harry, shaking the contents about and peering in to make sure they haven’t gone mouldy. Pig makes a leap for the ribbon and he shoves her off. They look quite nice together, he thinks, lots of little jars with handwritten labels and strings of red and white, a little bit of dog slobber setting it off. He’ll take one round to Aimee’s and one to Annie, hand it over with a, “hey I do craft, now,” as if it makes up for the dozens of messages he hasn’t returned.

The holiday he’s supposed to be taking with his friends right after Christmas snaps at his synapses. He should’ve told Harry about it, but he wasn’t sure how to explain a DJ gig in the Maldives without explaining everything else and by that point, Harry had his foot so far up Nick’s leg it’d be illegal to do it in public in dozens of countries.

Harry won’t mind. Why would he? He grabs his holdall and throws a couple of t-shirts in it and a spare pair of jeans, along with the nice boots he’s barely worn since he’s been here because they have no grip whatsoever and make him feel like an unfortunate gazelle. He’s not sure what else to take, looks about his bedroom for inspiration, but Harry’s had away with most of his really nice jumpers and left his hoodie in trade. Nick picks it up in case he can’t get out of going to the football on Boxing Day and fills his wash bag with toiletries, hoping his mum has taken the hint and got him another one of that expensive face wash he likes, since his is nearly empty. He gives himself a spray
of aftershave before he drops that in too and zips it up, and he catches sight of himself in the mirror.

It’s not that his face has changed dramatically or anything, but he does look different, these days. His hair’s grown longer than it’s been in ages and he’s taken to wearing glasses nearly all the time because he ran out of contacts. It’s like looking at a softer drawing of himself.

“You ready?” he says to Pig as he hauls his stuff down the stairs. “What you taking? You want your banana?”

His mum relented and bought Pig a bowl and a bed so at least he doesn’t have to take those. He rolls the top over the bag of food she’s been working her way down, tapes it shut, and looks about for anything else he’s forgotten, then decides as he’s only going to be away a couple of days-slash-weeks it probably doesn’t matter.

He shuts his laptop. Inside, his book’s almost finished. He’s not been thinking about it, what happens when he finally types the last word, that actually, technically, he doesn’t have to come back here at all. Not for that.

“You want a wee?” he says.

He holds the door open for Pig and watches her out of the corner of his eye while he loads the car up. Shetrots around the perimeter sniffing at the grass but doesn’t squat.

“Guess we’re stopping halfway, then,” he says. He programmes the sat nav and looks up at the sky. The weather icon says snow and the clouds certainly look as if they’ll deliver on the promise. Nick herds Pig in and starts the engine, thinking like his mum would about getting some of the journey out of the way before it really sets in.

The pub windows are steamed up, full of shoulders and laughter. Nick staggers in through the door, cold skin protesting at the rush of sudden heat from the roaring fire. The bar is scattered with last minute shoppers and the same two old ladies who are always here at this time sit hunched in the corner over two mulled ciders, faces ruddy with exposure and their hands shoved into hole-ridden fingerless gloves. Nick imagines they’re sheep farmers or ploughing contest widows, but they might just as well be former bankers who moved here after the 80s for the good life and found it not quite what they imagined. Maybe they fell in love. Maybe that’s the sort of thing people do, here.

“Well you’ve been busy,” Anne says, eying the bags Nick’s manhandling between the stools and tables, trying not to dislodge anybody’s pint. “For Harry?”

“Not just Harry,” Nick says, even as it’s turning his skin pink. “There’s one for Basil and something for you — ”

“Oh love you shouldn’t have.”

“— and Gemma and — but yeah, mostly Harry.”

Anne peers into the bags, curtailing her smile with impressive control of her lower facial muscles.

“Would you mind if I stuck them under your tree? Only with the weather and everything I reckon I got to get going soon.”

“Go on up, you don’t have to ask.”

Nick smiles at her and edges round behind the bar, where the shiny oak falls away to reveal a narrow corridor that’s stacked with boxes of mixers Nick never sees arrive or deplete. He should ask about
it, probably, what is all this ginger ale for exactly? Does anybody ever order it, or did they google it and find it’s the best beverage to stockpile for an emergency? The imperious fox portrait eyes him as he edges up the stairs knocking the picture of ducks with his elbow, and by the time he manoeuvres into the lounge, he’s sweating inside his coat like he’s run a marathon.

The tree is wonky because Harry felt sorry for it and Anne felt sorry for him and all his feelings, and they decorated it with twists of gold and green and one giant star on top that looks as if someone no older than five made it. There’s a small scattering of presents all in different wrapping underneath its branches, and the stone fireplace has three strings of cards, swags of good tidings and wishes for days both merry and bright. Nick has four cards at the house — one from the local MP that’s not addressed to anyone, one from a plumber with a wreath made of spanners on the front, one from Anne, and one from Harry.

Nick takes his gifts out one by one and arranges them into piles, the rectangular box of the laptop forming the base of Harry’s pile and the squashy one on top. He touches the corner and moves it into place, and he’s just resting back on his heels when the door to Harry’s bedroom opens.

“Oh.” Harry stops in the doorway, wipes at his eyes, mulish and confused. “Hey. I didn’t know you were here.”

Nick rakes his eyes up Harry’s bare legs to his soft, rumpled boxers, and a jumper with a neckline so saggy Nick can practically see his nipples. The sleeves are about four metres too long. He might be the most perfect vision of cosiness Nick has ever seen.

“I was trying to sneak in like an elf or somat.”

“They just make the stuff, they don’t deliver it.” Harry reaches for him as Nick gets to his feet. “But since you’re here.”

His mouth’s warm and especially soft, and when he drapes his ridiculous sleeves around Nick’s neck and his jumper rides up, it would take a saint not to find exposed skin with their chilled fingers. And Nick is definitely not one of those.

Harry gasps but it’s a bit fake, comes with a grin, and then he’s back to kissing Nick like some kind of mulled wine mistletoe dream, all blurred edges and sleepiness with flickers of real heat underneath.

Nick pulls away far enough to nuzzle his cheek, missing him before he’s even pulled out of the carpark. “You want to open one now?”

Harry’s face lights up. “Can I? This some sort of Grimshaw tradition, open a present on Christmas Eve?”

“We don’t really do tradition.” Harry’s face falls. “Could start one now, though,” Nick says quietly, and he ducks down for the one he wants to watch Harry open. “It’s not the best wrap job I’ve ever done,” he says, holding it out. “Pig decided wrapping paper is basically for her entertainment so I ended up having to kneel on it, sort of fold myself in with the gift while I fought — ”

“Are these… moose?”

“Yeah. Bit wrinkled,” Nick says as Harry turns it over in his hands. “Christ, they’re like the before photo in an anti-aging advert.”

“For moosturiser.”
Harry snorts at his own joke, unpeels the tape as if he’s cautious not to tear the paper. Nick bets he’s that person who can’t bear to throw it away and keeps it all flat under his bed until March, along with all the cards he’s received and any envelope with a sticker or a nice festive stamp on it. Inside sits a proper old fashioned green jumper with a Fair Isle pattern, only instead of snowflakes it’s mince pies and the slogan on the front says ‘glad pie-dings’. He stood at the stall smiling like he’d just seen the most mega compilation video of puppies of all time, handed over twenty quid without a second thought.

Harry drags the jumper free, holds it up, turns it round, and then breaks into a grin that makes the rest of his face all but disappear.

“I know it’s stupid because you’ll only be able to wear it once or twice at most, and — ”

“But in the future — next year and the one after and stuff,” Harry says, holding it against himself, “I can wear it all December.” He strokes over it where it falls against his stomach. “It’s brilliant. I love it.”

Harry reaches for him and lands a kiss on his mouth. Nick’s expecting the noisy, exaggerated thank you sort, so he has to a step back to steady himself when Harry really goes for it, turns it into the kind they have at the end of a really good date, his lips slick from his own tongue and his fingers pressing into the back of Nick’s neck.

Nick opens up for him, breathing hard through his nose, desire coming from nowhere all in a rush — or maybe not nowhere, from the things he’s been thinking all day about how he won’t see Harry tomorrow or the next day or even the one after that, how it makes him ache, actually fucking ache, to think of how long it’ll be, how the life he’s created here is like wrapping paper around his old one and he’s not sure if he can get the old one out without tearing this one to bits.

Nick wants more and more at the thought, fumbling to get under the jumper Harry’s wearing. In his haste he gets tangled in the glad pie-dings one caught between them instead until Harry tosses it onto the sofa. The discarded wrapping paper rustles as he steps onto it to get closer, pushing against Nick with his entire body. He’s hard and Nick’s breath staggers against his mouth. He slides his hands around, rucking up Harry’s jumper to reveal more of his skin, running over his ribs and down down down. Harry takes a bite at Nick’s lip and tugs it into his mouth, barely bothering to kiss it better after, and Nick’s stomach goes wild.

“Want you,” Harry murmurs, licks at Nick’s jaw where he hasn’t shaved so the sensation grates all the way over Nick’s skin. Nick rests his head against the top of Harry’s shoulder to try and have a sensible thought, but it evaporates when Harry fastens his teeth on Nick’s neck and digs in. “Want you before you go.”

“Yeah, yeah ok.”

He shoves at Nick’s coat, gets it off his shoulders and halfway down Nick’s arms before Nick’s even started moving, like he means for them to fuck right here in the middle of the lounge with the Christmas cards watching. And Nick’s so into it he might just let him, is the thing.

Nick pulls his hands free of his sleeves, abandoning his coat where it falls, and steers him back towards his bedroom.

The whole room’s glowing faintly orange against the sunset beyond the window, and Harry’s string of fairy lights are on but not blinking where they hang above the pillows. They both stumble over the same bit of rug and Harry starts a laugh against his mouth but it dissipates almost as it begins. He pulls his jumper up over his head, emerges from the neck of it with his mouth and his eyes slightly
too open. He hesitates with his jumper balled up in front of him for just a second like he’s going to
say something before he drops it, sets about tugging on Nick’s fly, like Nick might be wearing
stripper trousers that rip off in one easy motion. Nick sheds his own jumper and the t-shirt under with
it, bats Harry’s hands away, and tackles the zip, both of them breathing too hard to really kiss
properly but going for it anyway.

They drop onto the bed, Nick on his knees and Harry with one leg between them, and Nick noses
over the warm material of his shorts with this feeling like he’s flooding, like every bit of him has
something pouring in that he wasn’t expecting. He covers Harry’s stomach with kisses just to watch
the way he sucks it in beneath. Harry’s hands don’t know what to do with themselves, flit between
Nick’s hair and the bed and Nick’s shoulders, like he’s trying to scoop Nick’s freckles up to keep.

And it gets dark, somewhere between trying to lick the twinkles cast by the fairy lights off Harry’s
skin and Harry pushing inside him, somewhere after scrabbling his heels against the back of Harry’s
legs and telling him not to dare fucking stop, somewhere in the middle when he doesn’t care about
anything except the feeling Harry’s driving him towards and the taste of his own name as it spills out
of Harry’s mouth. Harry comes after he does, teeth bared and almost gritted, eyes screwed closed
until it hits him, when his mouth and eyes open like shutters. He’s the most unguarded, perfect thing
Nick has ever seen.

And maybe because it’s dark, it feels softly urgent, afterwards, when they’re tangled up together with
blankets like vines around their legs, to trace Harry’s nose with his fingertip, and tell him right then
and there.

“I love you.”

Harry stares at him for what feels like longer than Nick’s entire lifetime, and then, very quietly, he
says, “Oh.”
Glad Pie-dings

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for sticking with this fic. Merry Christmas to you if Christmas is a thing you do xox

When I was a kid, asking for things for Christmas was a minefield. There’d always be a thing I wanted, like a specific pair of trainers that I thought would transform me into likeable or a coat I thought would cover all my undesirable physical characteristics — but I could never just ask for them outright. Certain items would trigger my dad’s rage about the state of the world and others would send my mum pearl-clutching about the price of everything, so I worked out a strategy: avoid anything big ticket like a computer and go for a range of mid-price items which would, if I did it right, add up to a greater value overall. Then once Christmas was over, I’d hit mum up for the receipts, return the stuff, and get what I’d wanted in the first place.

Really though if I wanted a pair of trainers what I should’ve done was got a job in a department store wrapping Christmas presents and used my staff discount to just buy them, not take my parents and myself on a merry seasonal dance. But it makes you think about how much we evade just asking for what we want or taking no for an answer.

Some of my friends, they believe in fate, that you’ll meet who you’re supposed to meet and end up exactly where you’re supposed to be. It’s a nice idea — especially if you’re currently somewhere shit both emotionally and physically — but isn’t it just a way to avoid being direct about what you want? If you’ve put your trust in fate, isn’t it really easy to fool yourself into thinking someone is right for you just because they’re there, because forces beyond your control have decreed it, rather than asking them if they’re capable of being the kind of partner you need?

Just like me when making a Christmas list, we avoid being honest because we’re afraid of the consequences of doing things in straight lines, only when it’s with people, there’s nothing to take back in the sales to trade.

~*~

The service station greets him like the glare of one big headlight, the car park teeming with harassed parents and children wrapped up in puffer jackets in every colour of metal and pink. “You want a wee?” Nick says, to Pig, and she cocks her head at him. “Fine but I do.”

He gets out and nearly skids on a patch of ice, teeters his way to the crossing and the entrance with both arms out like an ice skater regretting not going for one of those safety stabilising penguins. At least there’s not a queue for the toilets like there was last year, when some plumbing disaster had closed all but one cubicle and rendered the entire place a queue of winding misery. Nick bought one of those toothbrush balls to stop from peeing himself and genuinely considering just going outside and using the facilities offered by the bushes around the Travelodge.
There’s a poster about incontinence above the urinal. Harry’s advice column about karaoke pops into his head. He smiles at it, tucks himself back into his jeans, only a little bit thinking about how recently Harry’s hands were there. He always feels a bit smug when he’s out in public after he’s had sex, surrounded by strangers, still feeling tender and blissed out and hyper all at once.

At the sink with a handful of pink goop, Nick catches sight of himself in the mirror. A red patch the approximate size of a hippo footprint blooms at the base of his neck. Harry’s right there again, sinking his teeth in like he was hanging on the edge of a cliff for dear life. Nick smirks and rinses his hands, flicking the water across the plughole. He gets his phone out and tugs the neck of his jumper down to take a picture of his reflection. Then he redoes his hair because it looked like a particularly dishevelled cornfield and takes another one, one eyebrow lifted in accusation.

He goes out to Costa and sends it to Harry, with the caption:

*How am I supposed to explain this to my mother?*

He orders a coffee — one of the fancy Christmas blends that claims extra warmth for his journey and sits down to scroll through his messages. They’ve really racked up lately with offers of parties and queries about when might be a good time to pop round. It’ll take him the best part of a day to get through them and he didn’t order that big a coffee, so he just shoots one to his mum with his ETA.

“‘Scuse me, mate — ”

The guy at Nick’s shoulder is about Harry’s age, cold eyes and an expression Nick can already tell is almost permanently set to sarcastic.

“— can I get a picture?”

“Sure,” Nick says and stands up.

“My sister’s going to shit herself.”

“Make sure you put some newspaper down or something, then.” Nick drops his arm around the guy’s shoulder. His face appears on the guy’s phone screen. “Oh would you look at my hair.”

The guy clicks the button and it’s not a bad one, even though the way Nick’s lifting his shoulder to try and obscure the view of his neck makes it look like he’s crouching to take a selfie with a hobbit.

“Have a good trip, yeah?” Nick says.

The guy stalks off, already tweeting it by the looks of it. Nick catches the eye of several other people who are now looking his way and trying to place his face. He grabs his coffee and his phone, where a new message has appeared:

*Tell her your boyfriend did it x*

Nick’s not sure what the appropriate reaction is for that, so he sends Harry a blushing emoji and a crying laughing one and leaves it at that.

When he gets to the house, there are three cars already parked in the drive and fairy lights flashing yellow to red and back again in the window. Pig makes straight for the middle of the front lawn to have a wee and dig about in a way his mum will be thrilled about. Nick hauls his bags out of the boot and herds her to the door.

Inside, everything smells like he expects, right down to the festive air freshener that puffs a cloud of
apple and cloves at him as he passes. He shouts to anyone who cares that he’s here and merry Christmas. Once he’s through the hugs and everyone critiquing the route he took, everything is the usual disarray of trifle-making and sausage and bacon wrapping, even though Nick specifically ordered his mum a hamper with everything they might conceivably need. He pulls Liv outside for a fag and a gossip, asks about her terrible boyfriend, and then throws himself into making the stuffing, stirring the onions into the packet mix and rolling it up into balls.

They do what they always do on Christmas Eve, drink too much and get a curry and say they’ll get an early night but instead end up swapping stories until gone midnight. No one asks about the bruise on Nick’s neck or what he’s been up to the last few months, and as he pulls up the covers of his old bed, he decides it would be foolish to mind.

Sometimes when he wakes up on Christmas morning, Nick misses being a kid and having a stocking full of little tokens of nothing to open on his own. It used to be his favourite bit, peeling the foil shells off coins and eating them in bed before anyone else was awake, just him and Christmas, nice and warm and cosy and looking forward to the day. When he has kids, he’ll —

He stops himself and swings his feet out of bed, Pig chasing them with her paws like she’s forgotten they’re attached to him. “You idiot,” Nick mutters, and she grins at him, tongue lolling out of her mouth.

He shoots Harry a text to say good morning, and it’s weird to have to do it because normally, Harry’s there or he will be very shortly, Nick’s always going to see him at some point. But not today. He feels like less of himself now he’s realised it, and it’s sort of tugging at him, Harry’s Oh, but he puts some music on and has a shower and gets dressed and keeps it just at bay.

Downstairs, Nick’s mum has done her usual explosion of breakfast — toast on a plate on top of the microwave, chopped fruit on the counter next to the trifle for later, bacon and sausages under the grill as well as on a plate next to it, like she’s forgotten she was taking it out halfway through, scrambled eggs mostly stuck to the sides of a pan.

“He morning love,” she says, and he gives her a one-armed hug and steals a sausage.

There’s the usual comments about how he never normally eats anything and Nick goes into the lounge to have a nose through the Christmas cards and read the little round-robin letters his mum’s old friends send about who’s had surgery and what grades the kids got at school. He should’ve made his mum write one. And Nicholas, having presided over either the most popular or second most popular breakfast show on radio depending on which figures you look at, decided he wanted a new challenge and left for pastures undecided. We’re very proud of his achievement, despite only listening once or twice and under deep protest. He’s been off in a forest writing about god knows what, I just hope he remembers to run it through a spellchecker and something to tell him when he sounds like a twat.

He gives Pig a bit of charred bacon from the grill and then her real breakfast outside, and since there’s not much room in the garden and his mum’s starting to look for volunteers for things like sprout peeling, he decides to take her for a walk.

The countryside actually rolls here. Sometimes he thinks there’s a particular kind of green that just
makes his eyes feel better, this particular shade of grass which makes him feel like the word *verdant* actually means something. He takes the path he used to take when he was a teenager trying to have a strop — up over a hill where the wind makes any coat billow like you’re in a music video. He never really felt his pain was enough when he was younger, it always felt like it needed a soundtrack to amplify it and make whatever he was upset about feel like a worthy thing to throw a snit over.

Not that he’s in a snit.

There are loads of reasons Harry wouldn’t say *I love you* back to him. It would be stupid to dwell on it. His coat billows but Pig lollops around and finds all the mud, comes back smiling.

When they get back, his mum shrieks at the sight of her and the thought of cleaning the floor again, so Nick scoops her up and carries her to the bathroom to hose her down in the shower. He gets more water on himself than on her, ends up having to wipe the shower walls down with a towel and hide it at the bottom of the laundry hamper.

At least by the time he’s done, the kitchen is steaming and a couple of his relatives are on their way to that too. “You all right?”

Nick’s mum breathes heavily up into her own fringe, eyes all over the kitchen like she’s annihilating bits of it inside her head. “I need a volunteer to do the gravy.”

“Don’t look at me,” Nick says, taking a seat at the breakfast bar near the roasted nuts, “you always say mine’s horrible.”

“You don’t do the cornflour right.”

“According to you. I do roasts all the time for my mates and no one else’s got a problem with it.”

“Or they’re too kind to say,” she says, distracted.

Nick grabs a handful of nuts and starts sorting the whole ones out from the halves because they taste better for reasons he’s never really understood. “You could show me how you want it doing instead of just slagging it off every time.”

“If I’m going to babysit you through it, I might as well do it myself. Jane — can you — ”

“No chance.” She meets Nick’s eye sympathetically and steals a nut.

It’s a half so he lets it go and Nick’s phone lights up:

**Harry:**

*How’s it going?*

Nick smiles at the screen, drums along with the pads of his fingers to the cover version of *Santa Baby* blaring out of the radio.

*trapped in a gravy conflict*

He reaches for another peanut and watches the little typing dots, picturing Harry with a paper hat perched on top of his curls. Nothing appears though so Nick carries on:

*Might need rescue.*

*Send a gravy boat.*
“Seriously, who’s doing the gravy?”

Jane snags a carrot from the pan. “I told you not me.”

“Aww but yours is the best, Jane,” Liv says. She tops up her mimosa and flicks through the Radio Times. “Are we watching the film later?”

Nick’s mum flaps a tea towel at the steam. “Is it that one with the Hulk with funny ears in?”

“You mean Shrek, mum?”

“I don’t know do I,” Eileen clucks. “Someone get the bleeding Oxo.”

“Fuck’s sake, I will do the fucking gravy.” Liv rolls her eyes, sets down her glass, and goes to root through the pantry.

Nick’s phone vibrates — Harry, FaceTime — and Nick slides it to answer, rearranging his hair. “Hiya,” Nick says. “How’s it going?”

Harry’s wearing his Christmas jumper and his face looks all soft and a bit sleepy. Nick tilts his phone up for a slightly better angle. “Great,” Harry says. “We just did presents — mum says thank you for the earrings, she loves them.”

“Oh, I’m —”

“And Gemma really liked the ones I got her. And I —” Harry breaks off into a chuckle, looking down. “— I don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you is traditional, I think.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Don’t mention it. Was about time Middling Slaughter’s top media mogul had a laptop he can open more than one programme on at once.” Nick picks out another nut and tries to eat it in a way that might look seductive — or at the very least not totally off-putting.

“You like your —”

The picture freezes.

Nick’s mum pauses on her way to the fridge and glances at the screen, where a version of Harry is caught in time and space asking a perpetual question. “Who’s that when he’s at home?”

“Harry.”

She leans in, hand on the back of Nick’s chair. “Is he in a toilet?”

“Looks like it doesn’t it,” Nick says.

“Why’s he in there?”

“It’s the only place he gets really good reception.”

“And why’s he calling you on Christmas Day?”
“Bloody hell, mum, people are allowed to call me.”

Her face lines with imported worry and judgement. “Does his family know he’s in the toilet calling you instead of spending time with them?”

“I suppose they must, mustn’t they? Not that they’d mind — they’re very fond of me, actually.”

Eileen leans back with the weight of indignation. “Why’ve you met his family?”

Nick stalls with a similar noise to the one his first car used to make before he fully understood what the clutch was. “Because I have. Because he’s — ”

He was going to tell them — he was just going to do it right before he left in an attempt to get away with minimum ribbing. He had a plan, of a sort, for emergencies, for if they started in on him being tragic and alone — he was going to act coy and say maybe they don’t know the full story. The plan was really light on details for what to do with a direct question about toilets and families though, which on reflection was probably a bit of an oversight.

“Well,” Nick says, “— he’s — my friend? Or — more than. We’re — seeing each other. Sort of. He’s my boyfriend.”

“A boyfriend? You?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

Nick’s mum takes a step back to collect herself, drying her hands on the end of the tea towel wilted over her shoulder. He imagines in other households — like Anne’s — maybe this would be met with pleased expressions of joy and surprise and invites for him to come over as soon as possible to be assessed for suitability. But because he’s related to these people, instead he gets:

“Here, you hear this, everyone? Nick’s got a boyfriend.”

In the lounge, Nick’s brother turns the TV down. “You what?”

“A boyfriend,” Nick’s mum shouts, with the same kind of gusto Beyoncé would give a particularly high note.

There’s a scuffle behind them and the doorway fills, Nick’s brother and nephew trying to get through it at once. “We opening a book on how long it lasts, then?”

“I’ll have a hundred quid on two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” The scoffing noises from all corners aren’t exactly flattering. “Two days more like, especially if he hears Nick singing Mistletoe and Wine.”

There’s no reason the laughter that gurgles round the room should make Nick bristle like it does. “Shut up, all of you.”

“Ooooooh, tetchy.”

Nick’s mum makes a face like there’s about to be a fight on the kitchen floor and she knows she should diffuse it but she also kind of wants to see who wins.

“He’s a really nice person, if anyone’s bothered,” Nick says. “He’s a veterinary nurse and he takes photos and he can cook and he’s friends with lonely old people.”
“Guess we know who’s dumping who, then,” his mum says, and everybody laughs.

From the table, there’s a distant, “Hello, Nick’s family.”

If the Grimshaws can do anything, it’s scatter.

“Which ones do you — ” Liv comes back in clutching Oxo cubes to find the kitchen totally silent, except for the radio, which is now blaring out Christmas In Hollis while Nick sits there with a fixed expression, wondering what to say to Harry’s awkward smile. “What’s happening?” Liv says.

Nick holds his phone out to her and Harry obliges with another wave and a, “Hi I’m Harry, the boyfriend no one knew about.”

“Hi… Harry?” Liv’s face does something Nick’s not sure it’s ever done before, a kind of convulsion of uncertainty. “Is this a prank? Am I on radio? Did you get your job back?”

Nick swallows. “Can I call you later?” he says, to Harry.

Ten seconds after he hangs up Nick gets a text. It just says:

this explains a lot

~*~

Nick tries to shed his irritation, stepping into the lounge to watch some football round-up and saying all the right things about something being a great goal, setting the table without being asked and arranging the napkins the way his mum likes rather than the way he thinks looks better. He makes his way through four roast potatoes before someone brings it up again, how hilarious it is that he’s got himself a younger man, someone who’ll laugh at his jokes maybe because they don’t understand Nick’s not funny.

“Why d’you like him, anyway?” gets fired across the table while Nick’s trying to peaceably spear a carrot.

Nick can’t really think of anything except all the little things Harry says sometimes which make him feel better about himself and the universe in general, but he can’t say that. “Maybe he didn’t look it in his Christmas jumper but he’s actually incredibly hot,” Nick says. “Besides, why’s anyone like anyone? Just meet someone and do, don’t you?”

His mum takes a swig of red, which moistens the stained smile she’s already sporting. “Where did you meet him, then?”

“At the vet. Pig wasn’t very well — ”

“Playing doctor, should’ve known it. Someone pass the gravy, this stuffing’s so dry it’s making my eyes water.”

After the plates are all cleared, they shuffle into the lounge to dole out the presents. Nick’s sit, gift-wrapped in matching snowflakes in a giant pile apart from everyone else’s. He kind of wishes he hadn’t bothered and had just got whatever he could find in the service station on the way up. He
always does it, goes overboard. It’s not that he thinks affection can be bought; but maybe a bit of him believes it can be enticed out of people if they can see how much affection went into the gifts he brought, like if he gets enough things with a high thread count and a provenance in the workshop of experts in the Highlands and Italy and Paris, if he gets things monogrammed or engraved and presented in impeccably-folded tissue paper, his family might see that he loves them and lay off.

Nick looks over to the other armchair where his mum’s unwrapping a jar. “Chutney?” She squints at the hand-drawn label. “What on earth will I do with that?”

“Thinking way outside the box here but you could eat it with some cheese or something.”

She holds the jar at arm’s length as if she’s afraid it’s going to go off in her face. “And you made this, did you?”

“With your recipe.”

“Why didn’t you just go to Tesco’s?”

Nick’s entire side is getting really warm from being too close to the fire. “Anyone want a drink?”

He gets up and goes into the kitchen, cooler air wrapping him up like the opposite of a jumper. Next year he’s getting them all sprouts. Essential sprouts from Waitrose. He pours himself a glass of wine and puts a reminder in his phone to that effect. There’s no sprout emoji and he takes it far worse than he logically should and settles for trees.

He pads around the kitchen ostensibly tidying but actually picking bits of turkey out of the leftover plate and then seeing how much cream he can scrape off the top of the trifle and then swirl it back again without it being obvious. When he gets bored of that, he digs his phone out and texts Harry to say he’ll call him in a minute if he wants to get his arse somewhere they’ll be able to talk. He swigs his wine and, thinking it’s been long enough, calls Harry, with the irrational thought that he’s out of place here and he just wants to fucking go home.

Harry answers with a sleepy hello. His face on the screen pushes some of the tension out of Nick’s shoulders. He rests his phone on the stand thing his mum uses for her recipe books and gets a chair from the other side of the breakfast bar. “Am I keeping you up?”

“I had a bit too much wine,” Harry says. He’s wearing an actual Santa hat and somehow making it work. He leans against the painted brick wall of the toilet like in another life he’s a model doing some kind of ironic photo shoot for Vice.

“You had a nice day, then?”

“Yeah. My cousins came and one of them bought her baby and now we’re playing Scrabble and I’m winning.”

Nick tries to picture it, all of them squashed in the lounge over the pub with a board game. He’s rosy tinting it, but it seems like real Christmas, like a warm and fuzzy picture, a baby to whack an astonished fist at baubles and trying to keep Basil away from the gift wrap. Nick tells him all about a minor turkey mishap when it slid off the plate and almost onto the floor and into Pig’s waiting paws while his mum was trying to carve it and what they’re planning to watch on telly, and he’s not sure why he’s not saying that he’s sitting in the kitchen on his own and feeling weird about everything, except that telling the truth about things like that is only well-received in films as far as Nick can tell.

As he listens, Harry’s eyes go lazy, like Nick’s telling him a bedtime story. Nick can’t really believe, sometimes, that he’s the same person who makes Nick crazy when he runs his fingers over the back
of Nick’s neck.

“Did y’see it’s snowing?” Harry says.

“Snowing?” Nick slides off his chair, parts the curtain, and looks out. “Oh — yeah it is here, too.”

It’s snowing everywhere, probably, the weatherman doing a dance to illustrate the way it’s swept across the country, but no one else is twitching the curtains to look so right here and now it feels as if they might be the only two who’ve noticed. He watches it — it’s that great bobbed clumpy sort that’ll settle unless it rains too much in the night, and in a rush, all he wants is to pull on wellies and take Harry’s hand and drag him outside for a walk, Pig and Basil bounding after them. He pictures them spending ages trying to get the perfect slow-mo Instagram of Basil leaping through a drift and disappearing into an unexpectedly deep bit and Pig trying to catch a snowflake in her mouth. He turns the phone around so Harry can see how Nick’s snow looks as it falls on his dad’s old rose bed, in case it might be dramatically different to the snow where he is. Harry scrambles up to unhook the window in the toilet and does the same — it’s thicker there, must have been at it longer, and when the blur turns into Harry again, he’s smiling and his hat’s askew. “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas,” he croons.

A laugh erupts in the other room and someone shouts, “Where’s Nick got to?”

Nick wonders if it would be terribly rude to sneak out into the garden and pretend later that he got abducted by reindeer.

“Ickles Peter if you’re in there puking red wine on the floor again I’ll — ”

“Should probably go,” Nick says.

“Ok. Give everyone my love, yeah?”

“Yes. Same.”

Harry rearranges his hat. “’Night then Nick,” he says, “glad pie-dings.”

~*~

Boxing Day dawns before Nick’s ready to handle it. He sits up in his bed, pressing at the place his head hurts, either from too much wine or sleeping funny on hair that’s started some kind of revolt. Downstairs, everything’s quiet, and he checks the time on his phone to find it’s only just gone half five. Apparently he’s on Harry wake up time or residual old radio time. The bedroom’s cold — maybe that’s what woke him. Pig’s asleep on the beanbag that’s somehow survived the numerous decoration iterations that have turned his bedroom into the spare one. It’s the same beanbag where Nick enjoyed his first adolescent fumble with a guy from college who refused to acknowledge him in public but would come over sometimes and kiss him in a way that made him queasy with nerves and excitement. He reaches for Harry’s hoodie. A small gift box falls out with it and tips onto the rug. He reaches for it and maps the corners, then the edges, pressing the stripy paper into it. Momentarily he wonders if it was Santa having seen the shitty time he was having, but that’s ridiculous, so he unpicks the Sellotape and peels the paper back. It’s a box, dark blue with the name of the shop embossed on the front in silver, nowhere he recognises. He flips it open and inside, there’s a bangle. It’s a bit folkier than he’d have chosen for himself, a pattern of leaves and flowers and little birds
winding all the way around it. They catch what little light there is from his old alarm clock and he
bets in the summer it’ll look really nice. He takes it off the little silky cushion it’s been resting on,
twisting and turning it until he’s confident he’s been right around twice and seen all the details. Then
something inside it catches his eye.

There’s a message engraved.

*To N from H x*

He stares at it for a long time, wondering what it means — beyond the obvious — running his
fingertip over the words to feel them, where they sit, etched into the cool, curved silver. He slips it on
right then and there, curls up hugging the pillow even though he doubts he’ll be able to fall back to
sleep.
The scariest three words in the entire English language are: I met someone. Because everyone knows what a someone is, they’re not a friend, they’re not a fling, they’ve substance of the kind that means you want to state their importance before you reveal anything about them.

I’ve never really believed in the idea of The One, that there’s this lone person wandering the planet who has a unique combination of personality and face which match your heart’s desire. If there’s some One in him, that’ll do for me, I always thought. But then you meet someone in that Met Someone way, and they become so important to you, admitting they exist outside your head is terrifying. As soon as you do it, they’re not just yours anymore – they’re your auntie’s comment about how young he is or your friends laughing at the fact he likes Nickelback – they stop being the person you think they are and start having all these other facets, all of which you then have to consider. And once one question is out, they swarm: is he the one with magic in him? Is he the one who’ll see all the cracks in me but act like they don’t exist? Is this it or am I kidding myself?

Questions are dangerous. They mean you can stand on the brink of losing him, looking down over the edge of where you’re convinced he’s already gone, and still not reach out to pull him back for fear all you’re really doing is letting him know how much you’re not questioning there being something monumental between you anymore.

The airport is like a scene from 28 Days Later, too bright and everybody hating being alive. Nick shoves his metal and his shoes into the grey plastic tray and mutters his way through being patted down and into duty free. It’s even brighter in there and he tries on fourteen pairs of sunglasses which all make his head look like a boiled potato, buys one of them anyway because he couldn’t find his RayBans and going to the Maldives without a pair in his hand luggage seems foolhardy at best.

He meets up with Pixie and George in a bar that sells nothing but gin and chips. They greet him with hugs and kisses and requests for how he’s been, cluster around while he tries to pick a cocktail, pointing over his shoulder at things they’ve already tried and what was vile and what was worth the exorbitant price tag. He steals a chip from George’s plate while he waits for his drink and asks about their families and their holidays, how life has been in general, nodding and making jokes about anything he can.

He tells them about his book and the house and the village, but comes up short on Harry, not knowing quite how to lead into it. He doesn’t want to declare it like it’s some big announcement. He twirls his bangle around his wrist and thinks he’ll just slip it into conversation casually at some point, like a normal person would, “oh my boyfriend loves those,” about a cocktail umbrella, or something. But he hasn’t said the word boyfriend out loud to anyone but his family in years – and even in the version in his head, it feels like he’ll fumble it and won’t quite be able to get it out of his mouth.

On the plane he lets two bona fide opportunities slip by, once when Pixie’s cackling that one of the cabin crew is flirting with him and Nick should tackle him into one of the toilets for a mile high fumble, and again when George is trying to be stoic about the responsibility of being everyone’s boyfriend when they’re single. He gets another glass of wine, thinking that might help him say it, but it doesn’t, just makes him feel a bit queasy when they land.
The heat when they make it out of the airport curls around him like a boa constrictor, and he’s glad when they fall out of the car and into the air conditioning of the resort. He necks a bottle of water as soon as he gets to his room and lies on the bed, his head spinning with post-plane confusion, his body convinced he’s still flying through a patch of turbulence. It’s a nice enough room — well, a hut, actually — there are grapes and oranges in a fruit basket and a bottle of wine chilling on ice in welcome. He’ll be sharing when everyone else arrives, so he takes advantage of the quiet and snaps a picture of himself lying on the bed in his new sunglasses.

He loads it into the window where he’s messaging Harry, toying with a caption.

*These don’t suit me do they?*

*Wish you were here.*

He can’t think of anything but those two things.

He supposes he could’ve brought Harry along — they could’ve shuffled people around to make room in his. He tries to picture Harry against the view, rolls off the bed and gets up to pad across to the window. Beyond it, the sky is the kind of blue that paint can never quite capture and the sea beneath it is green in patches where Nick supposes there’s coral beneath. Around the cove there’s palm trees and white sand and a little bar with a bamboo roof, and maybe it’s just that Nick’s never really seen Harry in sunshine but he can’t quite picture it. Harry is jumpers and boots and woolly hats and static hair; he can’t see him in shorts and a tan.

A knock on his door interrupts what he’s thinking, and when he answers, it’s the rest of their party. His friends sweep him up into a collective, clamorous hug, and Nick just goes with it.

~*~

Some people do their reflecting staring out of windows in a fancy therapist’s office; Nick does his on sun loungers while listening to podcasts about subjects he feels unequal to. This one is about animals and he thought it’d be soothing but so far it’s just made him feel guilty for eating things with palm oil in – which he can’t remember doing specifically but he must’ve at some point and it’s enough to trigger his inner Catholic. He turns his head to survey the beach. The strip of sand is mostly empty, a couple of uniformed bar tenders standing under umbrellas with trays, ready to dart over at any sign of movement which might indicate someone is in desperate need of an iced drink or watermelon.

It’s a world and a half away from where he’s been. With the sun beating down, December feels like a joke. It’ll be over soon and take the entire year with it – he should start thinking about what he’ll play at midnight, whether he should go with his staple of crowd-pleasing Rihanna or something more left field. Whatever’s blasting from the speakers as the calendar flips over, he’ll have to face it sooner or later though: his life has changed and it’ll never again look like the one he spent years meticulously imagining.

Something catches in his throat. Maybe he needs an iced drink after all.

As he smiles at the waiter and orders a mojito, he wonders what Harry’s doing. He’s got exams at some point but Nick never managed to pin him down on exactly when. Maybe Harry has some kind of allergy to good luck cards. Maybe Harry just didn’t want him to know in case Nick made him nervous with his fussing. Maybe he thought they wouldn’t last that long so it wasn’t relevant.

He texted Harry from the airport: *off on my holibobs*, received the reply just as they were boarding:
It made him want to scream about how he still had the impression of Harry’s mouth on his neck, how could it all just disintegrate so fast?

It always happens to him. He gets invested – too invested – and never in people who want to do it back. It’s like a really shit superpower, the way he picks them out. He should ask one of his friends who are good at this sort of thing what he should do, pour his heart out like he has in the past, but when he opens his mouth to do it, somehow it comes out as, “Here Pix, did you know that beavers mate for life?” and agreeing to an excursion to look at sea turtles.

~*~

Heathrow is Nick’s least favourite place to be when he’s hungover. He trundles through arrivals to where his car’s waiting, climbs in the back and leaves the case to the driver, even though he usually hates when people do that. The beach and the heat and the row he started with his friends over nothing jangle in his head and a bit of him wants to tell the driver to take him to somewhere he’s never been before so he can start his entire life from scratch.

Instead, he rests his head on the window and thumbs through his messages. They’re mostly pictures of Pig from the sitter but there’s a few from Annie asking if he’s back yet and if he wants to come over for some baby time. He checks twice to see if it’s jet lag hangover brain but there’s no new messages from Harry, nothing since the one he sent to wish Nick happy new year. He did reply to it — he checks that as well in case the cocktails have got him thinking he did when he didn’t — he sent a picture of himself on the beach with fireworks going off in the background and Alexa giving him a blurry classic photobomb thumbs up.

The car idles to a halt and he’s home.

Home. What an odd concept.

They’re pulled up outside the house he owns, anyway. Nick tips the driver twice the going rate for helping him with his bag and to make up for not being up to anything even vaguely resembling decent conversation. Pig greets him at the door with a tail wagging so hard it might spring off and go into orbit, and he backs her into the lounge, abandons his case, and drops to his knees, hugging her to him while she wriggles and tries to lick his face.

“Hey Pig,” he says, and buries his face in the moving target of the scruff of her neck. “Missed you, pal.”

He busies himself with putting some washing on and opening the fridge to see if there’s anything in there which looks remotely not poisonous for dinner. He finds some noodles in the cupboard that he might be able to do in some soy sauce that’s just gone a bit crusty around the lid, then decides he should probably just get a take away. He gets his laptop out, sits down at the table, and rests his arms on the coolness of the marble. His book is still open.

Harry’s bangle glints on his wrist and he runs his fingers over the pattern of birds. Should he call him? Normally for a decision like this, he’d crowdsource it, but he managed to go an entire week not finding room for the word boyfriend and now he’s here, he’s not sure Harry feels like one at all.

He’s not sure anything feels like anything. He’s not sure he even feels alive.
He starts typing and it just flows out, all the things he never intended to say.

It’s almost sunrise when he runs out of words. He sends it to his agent and crawls to bed. He lets Pig get in with him without complaint, and cuddles her up next to him, murmuring affectionate nonsense into her fur until he falls asleep.

~*~

The next few days just sort of happen. He potters around without purpose, flitting from rearranging things he’d forgotten owning on the mantelpiece to making a half-hearted shopping list he keeps telling himself he’ll order from Ocado later. His life sprawls out in front of him like a large, shapeless rug, and he wonders if this is just it now: mornings without purpose and putting off doing things so he has something to do later. He thought — well, he thought there was some kind of magic in the turning of the calendar into a new year, that he’d feel better, that in some way it was all the fault of numbers and once they changed, he’d be filled with a sense of renewal and gracefully drift into the next phase of his life.

He’s not sure why he thought that. Surely if New Year’s Eve taught him anything at all, it’s that one year moves into the next with just more of the same old, his friends shrieking laughter at one another for the benefit of Snapchat and yelling at each other for trying to take pictures of themselves with the moon in the background. There might’ve been sand as fine as icing sugar between his toes and free flowing cocktails, but underneath it all, he was still the same old Nick with the same old problems: a career that’s not so much stalled as driven itself to the scrap heap and no one to talk to about how much he fears still being like this when he’s old.

Soon, his life will be on a shelf for people to purchase and thumb through. Maybe it always was, though. Maybe that’s what was wrong with it.

~*~

20% off all upholstery and soft furnishings! Valued Customer, join us for our sale before it’s too late!

It’s not the glowing praise from his agent he was hoping to find in his inbox, but he supposes he’ll settle for it.

He drags himself across town to the flagship store which the plaque above the door says has stood here since 1828. Succulents in artistically rustic planters spill out of the entrance and custom printed drapes fill the window. He heads for the rack of cushions with leaf and flower and animal motifs in various velvets, runs his hands over them, tassels dancing under his touch. He finds a couple he likes – one that’s green with ghostly leaves on and another with a pattern of flamingos that will gloriously not go with anything – but really he needs to buy a new sofa before he picks out the accessories.

He’s been putting it off since he moved. It felt like too big a decision, too much of a commitment to make when he didn’t know what he was doing with the rest of his life, as if the focus required to pick out a pattern would sabotage his ability to make other decisions. That was months ago though; he can’t sit on a sofa that sags the way his current one does forever.
With a sigh, he picks one of the leafy cushions up and takes it over to the display, thinking he’ll find something to match with it. The sofas are arranged by type, each one with a book of fabric samples attached to the arm for all the different options. He meanders between them, debating without much interest whether he wants one with legs to create a sense of space like he read about in an interior design magazine once and trying to remember what size he needs. One point two meters sounds familiar but was that the height or the length?

“Can I help at all?” The woman is young and posh and makes Nick feel too old and poor to even be touching the fabric.

“Does this one come in the leafy velvet you got over there?” he says. His voice broadens, more Northern, as if daring her to think he doesn’t have the money to shop in a place like this. “‘Cos it’s nice that, innit.”

“The Balmoral? Yes, certainly. We can do that with any sofa design, although the lead time if you want it on one of the Chesterfields is three months.”

“Three months? Christ, I could be dead or destitute by then.”

She lengthens her spine like she’s at yoga and her gaze falls to where he’s – somewhat inadvertently – hugging the cushion to his chest like a shield. “Were you looking for something available immediately?”

Nick wasn’t. He says yes anyway, because a new sofa to faff about with is the clear answer to everything. She takes him through the display, highlighting which of the sofas he can have within the week and which prints are discounted, at liberty to point out it’s not that the classic designs aren’t selling or are being discontinued, they’re just making some room for an exciting new range featuring a collaboration with an upcoming print maker.

Oh for the life of high-end haberdashery, Nick thinks. People wandering around all day at pains to say where you can overhear that it’s not your fault no one wants you.

“We would love for you to come to the launch event,” she says. “Let me take your details so we can send you an invite. Are you settled on this one? And is it a pair you’d like?”

He hands over his email address and she takes the cushion to bag up for him, leaving him to mull over the merits of a plain mint green versus floral, a ghastly leopard print he’s sort of tempted by versus a stripy almost black with red piping. Without his cushion to cling to, he feels oddly naked for a man sweating into the lining of his overcoat.

He sits down to test the sofas because his dad would roll his eyes at him for buying something he hadn’t even tried out, but they all feel vaguely sofa-ish, so he settles on the one without legs because Pig’ll only lose her toys under it and then insist at 4am he get them out again. He imagines watching TV on this sofa.

After a while, the sales woman comes back to check on him, handing over two cushions in a paper bag each and telling him if he orders today, she can offer him a great deal on a matching lamp. He smiles and flips between the mint and the leopard print. The version of his mum that lives in his head prattles about how the mint will get dirty fast but the leopard print screams midlife crisis, zoning out into vaguely anxious white noise until a woman steps backwards from the cushion display she was admiring and onto his foot.

“Oh gosh I’m so terribly –” She turns and her face lights up in recognition. “Darling!”
Florence. She’s wrapped up against the cold in a Burberry scarf arranged in impeccable folds, pearls in her ears and her hair scraped back into a glamorous sort of quiff.

“Oh hiya,” Nick says, and struggles to his feet to take her hand. He does a quick pass over his hair, knowing it’s unsalvageable, and rearranges his coat in the hope it might hide the porridge he spilt on his jumper which has now hardened into a craggy trail. “You here for the sales an’ all?”

He’s joking but she leans in with a conspiratorial twinkle. “You know, I can’t resist a bargain,” she says.

There’s something different about her face, as if she’s been using a moisturiser called Elixir of the Well-Rested which actually works rather than just dwindling your bank account. And Nick’s envious. So fucking envious. He’s had Christmas and a holiday in the sun and he still looks like the face of unremitting exhaustion.

“What d’you reckon then?” Nick says, holding the fabric swatches out. “If I get the green one will I regret it?”

“I think whatever you choose will be perfect,” she says, and lays a hand on his arm with such conviction, such faith in him to make a good decision, that it makes him feel fleetingly invincible.

He can’t imagine why someone would put her in a shoebox.

“And cushions of course, you’re picking those out too?” she says. She gestures to the bag at his feet where his black and green leafy things are nestling. Makes him feel like a penguin, incubating home furnishings. He nods. “Marvellous,” she says. “You are clever to get those first so you can take them home and get all the other bits arranged, so when the sofa arrives, you can just sit on it and admire all your hard work.”

He can imagine exactly why someone would put her in a shoebox. It’s a lot to take, being the vessel for someone else’s faith in you when you feel like you’re cheating at everything.

“What ‘bout you? Anything take your fancy?” Nick says, just as the shop assistant swoops back and declares –

“Mrs Dudley, welcome back.”

“Ms,” Florence says, pointedly but not unkindly. “I was rather hoping you could give me an update on my curtains. I know it was dreadfully short notice but I would so like them finished before I return home. International shipping is such a bind.”

The assistant scuttles off to the phone to check the progress of the order and Florence moves back to the cushion display, fingering the edging on a sage green round thing with a thistle on the front.

“Home?” Nick says. “You back off to Switzerland, then?”

“Yes,” she says. “I have to say I detest being this cold when it’s not even snowing. At the very least one should have a snow-capped mountain to look at.”

“All right for some.”

“We must try and have dinner before I go.”

“Sure – that’d be – I want to hear about Café Royal and if you ever saw Mick Jagger put anything unsavoury in his eyeballs.” Over her shoulder, Florence offers him an indulgent smile and Nick
wishes Harry was there so he could lean in and stage whisper things about Florence being a secret hell raiser, he just knows she was. “So – er – what about Joan? You going to see her too or –”

“She’s coming with me, of course.”

Nick takes a step back in surprise and almost loses his footing on one of his cushions. He tries to picture it, Mrs Whitstable in all her fragile severity agreeing to take off on a flight of fancy with a woman she’s been letting gather dust under her bed for half a lifetime.

“Does she know?” Nick says. “Or have you and Harry worked out some kind of well-intentioned kidnap?”

“It was her idea. She’s selling up.”

Nick makes a face which prompts Florence to sniff a laugh and try to hide it in her scarf.

“Granted, it was first suggested in jest under the influence of that wicked brandy pudding Harry served us on Boxing Day, but as the new year grew closer, the prospect of saying goodbye felt –”

She pauses, fingers stilling on the cushion, meets Nick’s eye. “One says goodbye to so many people and for so many reasons – sometimes out loud, and sometimes without meaning to, and sometimes by default as time passes and you haven’t said hello for so long, doing so would feel like saying something else entirely. But sometimes there isn’t a reason to say goodbye – not a good one – and you wonder what would happen if you didn’t say it. What would happen if we just let now continue, indefinitely until –”

“Curtains?”

“Quite,” she says. “They’re going to be a lovely surprise for her,” she says. Her gaze skips away to the display of hanging fabric, the desk where muslin and cotton and velvet is still measured by the yard. “We used to come here, full of dreams – the fanciful kind one has when one is young about what the future should look like, when one is consumed by the idea that with the right window dressing, one is sure to be content. And we always used to say one day. One day we will have a fabulous drawing room and this print and we shall know we are the luckiest devils alive.”

“What happened?” Nick says. “How did you go from that to – you know – not speaking and everything?”

A little bit he’s thinking about himself. He doesn’t want to end up a bunch of scrap paper memories under Harry’s bed. If he knows how it happened to Florence and Joan, maybe he can avoid it happening to them. If it’s not already, that is. But it’s their life, not his. “Sorry, I’m being n—”

“People travel at different speeds through life,” Florence says, quieting him with a faint smile. “It’s quite possible to reach where you want to go before the other does, to grow tired of waiting because you don’t believe they will ever arrive. Maybe you feel foolish standing on the platform, aimlessly hop onto the next train out of there in order to save face, because another ten minutes being that kind of alone seems so intolerable, you just need to get away to a place that doesn’t know it happened. And then perhaps you find it just took them a little longer to get there, that they wanted to be there with you, they were just diverted on the way or were scared to make the journey, not knowing you were waiting all along.”

He thinks of Mrs Whitstable winding a thread from the blanket around her finger, as if she needed a reminder of her regrets, the ones who all looked like the same person. He tries to see how it happened – young and in love but one of them married someone else for reasons of society or fear or maybe actual affection, the other hot-footing it away and leaving nothing but a trail of postcards. He
thought it was callous, to send those superficial titbits from Spain and South Africa and beaches in the Seychelles, dangling a fabulous life in platitudes and ephemera and pictures so bright they could only fade with time. But maybe all of them were saying the same thing: *I think of you still, I wish you were with me, come and get me, I am here.*

“You waited a long time for her.” Florence smiles at the cushion with the thistle on. “And you can forgive her, can you? For wasting all that time? For making you think she never – ”

“For giving doesn’t really come into it, darling,” she says. “Taking one’s own time with one’s own life isn’t a thing to be sorry for.” She lifts a zebra print throw and holds it out for Nick’s inspection. “Would it be frightful to get this?”

“Reckon it’ll make you happy, that’s all that matters, innit.”

Florence smiles and gathers the throw into her arms. “Let me know when you’re free and I’ll book somewhere fabulous for dinner,” she says, and wrinkles her nose up with glee at the thought. “My treat.”

~*~

Annie’s got smashed banana in her hair and a towel over her shoulder when she opens the door. She smells of soured kid sick but Nick hugs her for a really, really long time anyway. She takes him through into her kitchen, where the baby is chewing on the corner of a play mat in front of the picture window and her older brother is scribbling on the table with two chubby crayons at once.

“Which one do you want?” she says.

“I will take the baby, thank you,” Nick says. He crouches down beside her, smiling at the way her eyes widen at something she’s experiencing that has no real surface to it. “Aren’t you precious,” Nick says, smoothing her downy baby hair, even though it sticks back up again immediately.

“You would not have been saying that if you’d been here at five a.m. She’s like a gremlin. Can you try and draw on the paper, please?” Annie readjusts the sheet under the crayon, ruffles her son’s hair. “You want a coffee?”

She starts making it before he replies, digging mugs out of the bottom of a pile of washing up in the sink.

He used to come here all the time on Sunday for a pre-show curry. She’d tell him stories about what she got up to in Ibiza and cajole him into doing the radio in their pyjamas, slightly pissed.

Annie hands him his coffee and takes a slurp of her own. “This is my ninth,” she says. “So I may start bouncing off the ceiling.”

Nick smiles at her. She’s always had this way of making everything seem calmer. He remembers calling around on his way back from a terrible encounter with his film guy not-boyfriend, finding her in the middle of a children’s party, her house turned inside out with bits of carrot and wafer biscuit everywhere. She just ignored the mess and asked if he’d heard the Rihanna track that just dropped, played it for him on her phone, pointing out a second before it happened, “This bit is incredible.”

And it was incredible. A little slice of incredible nothing right in the middle of his awful day and her
carrot-infested living room.

“All right, Grim?”

“Yeah, course,” Nick says. “Just been to order a new sofa. I came this close to getting one in leopard print, but reason prevailed.”

She raises an eyebrow at him. “How’s it going, though? Country air help you sort your head out?”

Nick shrugs. He could tell Annie, probably, that he said I love you and it did nothing but bounce off Harry’s shocked expression, that he started an argument with George over the mildest joke about his perpetual singledom because he hates it, the way everyone thinks he can’t get it together enough to be with someone even though he knows it’s true and he can’t.

“Kind of met someone,” he says, fiddling with the baby’s romper, like it’s really vital for him to rejig the rucks in it so the picture of a skanking cat on the back is straight. “When I was away.”

“And?”

“And nothing. I’m here, he’s not.”

Annie blows across the top of her coffee. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but they have these things called trains now. Long-distance relationship could be good for you, I reckon.”

“Yeah really worked out for me, dating someone who lives in L.A.”

“There’s a bit of a difference, Grim, between being separated by a twelve hour flight and a two hour coach trip.”

He knows she’s right. He can sort of picture it, Harry with his weekend things in a bag and Nick picking him up at the station, hugging on a platform, lifting Harry off his feet. But just as easy, he can picture never looking back — never going back. He could wake up in five years having not thought about Harry at all and fleetingly wonder if he ever did pass his exams before making a coffee and getting on with his life. Why can’t he fast-forward forty years and see which version is the one he’s supposed to be in?

“I don’t think that’s what he wants.”

“He said that?”

Nick meets her eye and then immediately avoids it. “For him to do that I’d have to have spoken to him, wouldn’t I?”

“Grim – ”

“I know, all right, I know.” Nick pulls faces at the baby, screwing his nose up and then widening his mouth into a grin to see if he can get a reaction. “I know.”

“So what’s your plan? Just, like, chill out? See what happens? I mean what’s the worst that can happen? Can get your heart trashed by someone who lives around the corner just as easily as someone who lives hundreds of miles away.”

The baby splutters a semi-raspberry at him. “People do that, do they, just chill out?” Nick says.

“Dunno. Sounded good though, didn’t it, when I said it.”
Nick’s transported back to a radio studio, no lights on except the ticking countdown on the CD player. They’d listen to a caller’s problems, try to help, and as soon as the track started, look at each other across the microphone like, *who are we to be doling out the bon mots when we’re both at work in our pyjamas?*

Nick holds his thumb out for the baby to grab onto. Her nails are tiny but fiercely sharp and make him feel like they’re digging into his entire skeleton instead of just his knuckle. “You reckon anyone ever really knows what they’re doing?” he says.

“I’m dead sure no one does. There’s just people who are honest about it and people who are pretending. What’s he like, anyway?”

Nick can trot out the details of him – that he works at the vet and he saved Pig and he makes the best ham sandwiches Nick has ever tasted, that he lives above the pub and toils away above the Post Office on a newspaper Nick’s not sure anyone even reads. But that’s not who Harry is. Nick thinks about sitting on the fence in the garden, Harry telling him a story about a dragon who fell asleep and turned into the hillside.

“You can’t describe him,” he says. “He just is who he is.”

“Can’t wait to meet him, then. Maybe I’ll do it at your book launch. Threaten him, maybe – treat you right or I’ll beat him up with a hardback with a picture of your face on.”

Nick throws a baby sock at her, but when she ducks and laughs, he does too, and it cracks something inside of him that’s been hardened for way too long.

~*~

“What’ll I say to him?” Nick says.

Pig looks up from where she’s sitting, staring into the garden, shoots a cursory glance at his phone but probably only because Nick’s waving it.

“Where was my lesson on this at school?” Nick says. “Plenty of stuff about chuffing Napoleon and wiring a circuit to make a lemon power a lightbulb, but what good is that to me right here and now?”

He grabs a bottle of wine from the rack and uncorks it.

“Sod sex education too — when you get to the point of doing it, it’s self-explanatory enough — ” He flings the cupboard open to get a glass, turning in a dramatic arc as if he expects to see Greg sitting opposite him with a pair of headphones and an eager laugh. “What we all could’ve done with was a session on crafting the perfect cold opener text. Emoji use and all.” He sloshes wine into the glass.

“My entire fucking life has been blighted by angst about text messaging — how many hours does the world collectively lose to staring into a screen and debating Hi vs Hey vs Hello? If only our educators had been a bit more forward thinking, think of where we could be now as a species. Man on Mars, hello, we’d have that if we weren’t all down here wasting our time wondering what to text each other.”

Pig’s wandered off.

Nick sighs, sips at the wine. He looks at the window with Harry’s name at the top, and types:
You busy tonight?

It looks a bit impersonal but he hits send anyway because he's chilling out and just seeing what happens, then purposefully walks away to put some music on so he won’t just sit there waiting to see if a typing bubble appears.

He goes for a playlist he made ages ago for a trip to see his parents. He wasn’t in the best place emotionally — had just seen himself on the front page of a newspaper under a headline about X Factor ratings. He snuggled down inside his hoodie hoping no one would recognise him and watched the rain obliterate itself against the pane as he grouped together songs which seemed to fit with staring out of a window and wondering if anything was worth it. He’s never been very good at wallowing though so a lot of the songs are the kind that start out whimsical and train-starey and end up quietly hopefully, and by the time he got off the train in Manchester, he was feeling well enough to buy himself a Big Mac, having not eaten for the best part of four days.

He makes himself wait three songs before he goes back to his phone, telling himself that of course there won’t be a message and not to get all weird about it. He’ll sink the rest of the bottle and call a therapist in the morning and get Daisy to come over with some crystals that’ll help him move through the shame and embarrassment.

Red dot.

Fuck. If that’s not him –

But it is.

**Harry:**

_Not really, why?

Nick presses his lips together and types:

_Can I call you?_

**Harry:**

...

**Sure**

He definitely typed way more than that and edited it.

Nick gulps half his glass of wine and relocates to the lounge, where Pig’s sprawled out in her bed next to the fireplace. He sinks down in front of the radiator and rests his glass between his knees, watches headlights flash on the road outside to steel himself before he hits dial.

Harry answers with a throaty hello, like he’s been asleep, and Nick decides that’s not a bad place to start, nicely neutral and unterrifying.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” he says.

“M’ a bit poorly.”

“Oh, sorry, I can — ”

“No, it’s fine.” Harry coughs, loud at first, then muffled, like he’s got the sleeve of a jumper over his
mouth. “How was your holiday?”

“All right,” Nick says. “Sun, sea, sand, the usual. Glad to be back, though — I always think I like a beach and then I get bored within half an hour.” Nick squeezes his wine glass. “How you doing? Apart from poorly.”

There’s a long pause and Nick wonders if the line’s gone dead, listening to the crackles, distorted by his own nerves.


“Me? Yeah,” Nick says. “I was just thinking we hadn’t spoken since I got back and — ”

Harry splutters a cough.

“Was nothing, really.” Nick leans back against the radiator, its ribs digging into his spine. He can’t think what words to use that would take him to where he wants to be — or even where that is, really. “I ran into Florence. She told me all about her and Joan, how they’re starting a new life in Switzerland.”

“Don’t think it’s a new life – ” Harry breaks off into another cough. “S’like a do-over. The one they were always supposed to have.”

“You must be pleased, though. It’s not every day you help a pal get the love of their life back.”

Harry murmurs. The digital space between them goes quiet until Harry dissolves into another coughing fit.

“Here, you dying? I can text you instead I just thought – might be nice to speak to you ‘cos I… missed you.”

“Oh.”

Nick screws his eyes shut and bounces his phone off his forehead. “I should let you go, then, probably.”

Harry doesn’t answer for ages, and then very quietly he says, “Ok. ‘Night then, Nick. Thanks for ringing.”
When I moved to London, I was full of the kind of anxious hope you usually only see in film montages about people starting over after a soul-annihilating break up. I can’t recall if I actually stared out of the train window and saw the gaping mouth of Euston fractured through raindrops at an artful dusk, or if that’s just something I re-wrote later, but I remember buying a coffee and spurning the idea of both milk and sugar like a proper grown-up Londoner, hailing a cab because I didn’t want to ruin the moment fannying around trying to work out the tube.

The room in my mates’ house was like something out of a horror film — mattress on the floor and a lightbulb which flickered intermittently for reasons I never did fathom, and the sickly scent of pine air freshener permeating everything from a source we never found. Even though it was allegedly a bedroom, it had the only working sink in the entire place, so everyone would traipse through at all hours to brush their teeth or scrub their make-up off, wake me up crying over spilled affection and casually misplaced emotion. I loved it. I loved aggressively smoking on the front door step at 5am over guys who weren’t worth it. I loved talking big about all the things we were destined to achieve even though we couldn’t get our collective act together to pay the gas bill. I even loved the week-long blazing rows over who had taken the last tea bag. It felt like really living. Living is supposed to be grubby and imperfect; I never got the desire for a life straight out of a brochure for Taylor Wimpey houses, all neat and shiny like a sofa that’s never had the cellophane taken off.

I filled the first few months with sneaking into parties I’d heard someone important might be at. I used all my best credit-spotter facts, lived on bar nuts and whatever was on the super discount rack at the end of the week in the corner shop — a place which wasn’t even a real shop, more like a room in this old lady’s house where she’d had a counter built so she could sell knock-off DVDs and out-of-date custard between episodes of Bargain Hunt. Looking back, it seems impossible that led where it did, but the more you talk to people who’ve done unlikely things, the more you realise everyone is secretly still going ‘how did this happen?’, amazed they pulled it off. Everyone successful is one step away from returning to that mattress on the floor in their minds.

If I was in a film, I’d go back there to that house now — take a nice drive past, probably at night with some old classic playing on the radio, and I’d smile with whimsy and nostalgia at how far I’ve come in a way that makes it clear I’ve never been quite as happy as I was with a dripping tap and a bellyful of past its best Pot Noodle.

But I’m not. I’m a man who knows that house is now a Starbucks and a dozen flats with a gym no one uses, even though when they bought the flats they told themselves it was a real selling point and they would finally get that six pack. I’m a man who knows chasing a feeling is futile, a man who is coming to realise that imagining a life is always the better part of it. I’m starting to recognise that being in the moment of your currently occurring reality is a banal but necessary evil, otherwise you find yourself poking at raindrops that are clearly on the other side of the glass and thinking about people you shouldn’t be.

I might not know what I’m doing with my life next, but fuck if I’m going to waste it doing nothing but flicking mindlessly through reruns of my past.
The doorbell buzzes and Nick starts, looks up from the sofa he still hasn’t taken the plastic off because he can’t quite decide if he’s going to keep it. Pig barks and scampers to the letterbox as if she might be able to peer through it this time, and when Nick slopes over to join her, she looks up at him with an expectant grin. Nick turns the key at the same time as grabbing her collar and wrenching the door open, it sticking on the frame where the wood’s got all swollen up in the rain.

The postman looks like Gandalf.

“Need a signature,” he says, and shoves an A4 envelope at Nick, followed by his signy thing. Nick scrawls an approximation of his name that looks more like a drawing of a seagull and closes the door again, ignoring Pig’s plaintive mutter at the loss of someone she was into the idea of playing with.

He chucks the envelope onto the coffee table. It pirouettes to a halt just on the edge, avoiding upsetting a candle by a margin that would be impressive if Nick could be bothered to be impressed by things.

“What d’you reckon?” he says, waving at the settee. “It is too green, isn’t it?”

If Pig cares it doesn’t show on her face, so Nick decides *fuck it all* and flops down on top of the plastic to stare at the ceiling and wonder what the hell to do with the rest of forever.

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A week which contains nothing in particular passes. He frets about his book and gets halfway through calling his agent before bailing, speaks to his mum while she’s doing a big shop and lies about being fine, stares at the bits of the garden he should get around to tidying but instead of starting, texts all of his friends to ask if anyone knows a fit gardener. It’s practically a full time job. Between that and watching re-runs of *Come Dine With Me* his schedule is —

Who’s he kidding. He misses having shape to his days and a reason to get up and start them.

He’s coming down the stairs after a wee he put off for way too long when there’s a knock at the door. Postman’s late. He swings by to open it and——

Harry.

Nick doesn’t know at all what to do with his face.

“Was in the area,” Harry says.

Pig scrabbles up out of her bed and races over at the sound of his voice but it’s not enough to distract Nick from the prickling panic that’s using his vertebrae as a stepladder.

“You were fucking not.”

Harry swallows.

He has Basil tucked under one arm, what looks like a newspaper under the other, and his hair tucked under his pink beanie. His incipient grin slides down his face.
What the fuck is he doing here. What the actual fuck.

“Piggy Pig Pig,” Harry says and kneels down to greet her, Pig beside herself trying to lick his face and Basil’s at the same time. “Get off, Pig. Urgh.”

It’s really happening. Harry ‘Oh’ Styles is on his doorstep clutching a dachshund. The only way Nick can really think to get through it is just to sort of pretend he knew this was coming. Act normal. Natural. No, better than natural: nonchalant.

“What you doing, then?” Nick says. “In the area.”

“Er — well — Niall, he’s blagged himself a meeting with a deli about his yoghurt and Liam — you remember Liam? He came with us ‘cos he’s auditioning for… that TV thing.”

“You covering it for the paper, then? Local lad made good, all that?”

Harry hesitates. “I — no. I should probably have thought of that,” he says. Harry straightens up, pauses like he’s expecting Nick to say something and when Nick doesn’t, he hugs Basil a little tighter. “Basil’s never been to London. Thought I should bring him for a look.”

“You — er — you feeling better, then?” Nick says. He catches Pig’s collar just for something to do with his hands and tugs her back over the threshold.

Confusion passes down Harry’s entire body before he says, “Oh, my cough? Yeah. Thanks. Think I’m over the worst of it.”

Nick frowns, something he can’t quite grasp tugging at a bit of his brain that’s apparently been frightened away, but he snaps out of it enough to gesture to the hallway. “You coming in then or what?”

The hall — which normally feels vast — shrinks as soon as they’re alone in it, the air too dry to fully breathe, as if his air freshener has suddenly started pumping out Saharan atmosphere. Pig doing loops of them, whacking her tail against their legs one after the other, does nothing but highlight how little room there is and Nick fights the urge to tug at the neck of his jumper.

“Shall I give you the tour?” Nick offers, just to get out of the hall and into somewhere bigger — somewhere less personal — although admittedly the room where he keeps his coats and a painting that was a very expensive gift he hates isn’t really very personal at all.

He edges around Harry and into the living room, gesturing at the ceiling like he’s an estate agent trying to offload the place onto someone unsuspecting. “So this is the lounge — it’s a bit noisy, sometimes, right on the street, but once you’ve got the telly on you hardly notice it.”

Harry looks around, nodding at the fireplace, the collection of pictures above that Nick still hasn’t managed to get framed, and the chewed up dog toys lying in front of it like they’ve been slain in battle. “Nice.”

“It’ll be all right when it’s finished,” Nick says. “What d’you think of this sofa? I think it’s too green. Or maybe the rest of the room isn’t green enough. I don’t know.”

“I —” Harry’s eyes sweep over it, like he’s punching the buttons through the back with his gaze. “— it’s — yeah. Green.”

100% he hates how green it is.
“It’s comfy,” Nick says, suddenly feeling the need to defend it. “Me and Pig spent nearly eight hours on it the other day and — ”

He realises that makes him sound tragic. Pinching his lips together, Nick steers Harry out of the door again and into the kitchen. “This is what sold me on the place,” Nick says. He takes a broad sweep with his hand over the breakfast bar and the skylight and the glass wall that leads out to the garden.

The view, compared to the one he had in Middling Slaughter, isn’t exactly spectacular — mostly hedge that his mum keeps on at him to get trimmed and a statue of a pig he bought for a laugh — but Harry goes over anyway and practically presses his nose to the glass.

“You’ve got a barbecue?”

He glances back like it’s somehow impressive and important so Nick nods. “Going to have friends over, in the summer. Drive the neighbours mad.”

Harry hums in agreement and sets Basil down. “You mind if I let him out for a bit? Been cooped up and his legs might be short but they could still do with stretching.”

“No — no — go for it,” Nick says, crossing the distance between them to unlock the door and slide it open. The gust of cold almost makes him rock back on his heels. He catches hold of the frame and stays there, even when Basil and Pig dash out. Pig circles Basil, woofing low down in her throat, and immediately tries to engage him in some kind of game that doesn’t appear to have any rules, while Basil turns his attention to snuffling around her ragged old tennis ball where she abandoned it on the grass.

Harry watches them both with his hands in the pockets of his coat before turning slowly back to Nick with a smile that takes an age to happen but is mildly devastating when it does. His eyebrows look perfect in the weak winter sunshine, fuck, his face looks perfect, and he’s wearing a really nice black knitted jumper as the ultimate kicker. “He missed her.”

Nick’s throat is all tight and weird and his stomach is gambolling like a dachshund over a tennis ball. “I think there might’ve been some mutual pining going on.”

“Right,” Harry says, and cocks his head. He lets a moment pass just considering Nick, and then he adds, “Were you ever going to come back?”

“ ‘Course,” Nick says, avoiding his eyes. “Just had stuff to do here, didn’t I? I had to get that sofa delivered and there’s been other stuff as well — I’ve a bed for the spare room to organise and there’s painting to get finished and…. ” He trails off. “It was on my list.” He frowns as the thought he had before finally solidifies into one he can let out of his mouth. “Here, how did you know where I live?”

Harry wets his lips, flicker of uncertainty in his eyes before he pushes it away. “Combination of factors,” he says.

Nick waits but he doesn’t go on until Nick pointedly makes a noise.

“Well — er — ” Harry picks at a loose thread on his cuff. “I was quite into the Arctic Monkeys for a while — around the time of their first album, mostly — and, well, Alexa Chung has quite a distinctive face, doesn’t she?”

He looks up like it’s not a rhetorical question, meets Nick’s eye in that tractor-beam way he has which makes it impossible to be anything other than captivated and slightly confused.

He goes on. “And I always spend New Year’s Eve with Niall — so when you sent me that picture
with her face in, I thought it really looked like her — like really, really looked like her — and he was there to agree with me, and because we’d elected to just stay in the pub ‘cos of his foot and… various other factors, that meant we could double check it immediately with, like, this photo of her from an awards do? Then we went on her Instagram and kinda watched you DJing from the toilets. You were pretty good, we thought.”

He pauses, peeking at Nick’s reaction like Nick’s a cornered animal, scratches at the back of his neck as if finally he’s found something to be nervous about. “So there was that. And then while I was visiting Mrs Whitstable, Liam got this call inviting him to audition for the TV thing — they’d seen him in one of the national papers, must’ve picked it up like you said they might. And if you told them to keep it quiet, who you are, well, they both ignored you. Sorry. Think they just got a bit overexcited.” He unfolds the newspaper that was under his arm and lets it drop open. “And then there was this, obviously.”

It’s a paparazzi shot from a couple of weeks back — Nick clasping his forehead as he leans on the wall at the end of his driveway while two portly fellows wedge his new sofa into his front door. The headline is **re-X Factor: unemployed DJ splashes out.** Nick’s heart threatens to wrench itself out of his chest just to stop being associated with him.

“I know you think I’m bad at all the journalist stuff,” Harry says, “but even I can find someone’s address when no one’s bothered to blur out the road sign of the street he lives on and there’s a picture of his front door right in front of me.”

If someone had asked him at what point in his life he truly knew the meaning of the word panic, Nick would have cited several instances: the time he interviewed Katy Perry with a wicked hangover and came perilously close to having to lean away from her for a tactical barf in the nearest receptacle, in this case, her handbag; the time he was about to meet the queen and could not for the life of him remember how you say ‘ma’am’ even though someone had just been through it with him nine times; the time he gave Brett Matthews from 12A a hand job out of the back of the chip shop and he pushed Nick against the wall and threatened him with outing him to his parents if Nick breathed a word. But this — this is next level.

Harry knows.

Nick doesn’t need to read the full article under the sofa picture to know what it says, how someone will have had a gay old time picking through the bones of his demise and laying it all out as supposed exposition for him buying a frigging sofa. Failed, sacked, dumped, rumoured breakdown, it’ll all be there in literal black and white. Harry won’t have needed any journalistic skill whatsoever to put together the last two years of Nick’s life, to have everything he thought he knew about Nick ripped into pieces and replaced with the worst possible take on events.

He should say something. He should explain that all those things are true but that’s not how it was, but when Nick looks inside himself, all he’s got by way of reply is: “I’ll put the kettle on, shall I?”

He makes tea with the kind of focus he’d never be able to muster on purpose, practically counting the leaves as they percolate inside the bags. He keeps waiting for Harry to say it, to shout **how could you lie to me for so long, how dare you not tell me, who do you think you are?** Or worse, to say he’s sold his story and the one thing of Nick’s that’s truly his will be everyone’s by the time tomorrow’s breakfast is cold.

But Harry doesn’t say anything. He just takes the mug of tea and smiles slightly awkwardly.

Nick fists his hair and pulls it tight. “Can you please just say something?”
“Er — I like your pig statue, even though it's slightly anatomically inaccurate?”

“About me, about — the thing — about me being in the paper.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. Literally anything. Shout at me or whatever, I don’t care, I just can’t stand not knowing what you think and what you’re going to do.”

“What I’m going to—?” Harry frowns, looks at Pig and Basil, and then back. “Nick, I — ” He looks at Nick like Nick imagines he might peer into the mouth of an injured baby rabbit, all careful and considerate and looking for something broken he can fix. “Wait, are you joking?”

“No, I’m not bloody joking.”

“So — you’re really worried about what I think about… the thing? That’s… what you’re being… twitchy about, like, specifically?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I — I didn’t tell you. I let you think I’m someone I’m not.”

Harry considers it for a moment and says, “Oh.”

The word is starting to give Nick hives. Invisible hives in his brain which itch and itch and itch and make him want to tear it out and throw it as far away as possible.

“I don’t think I agree that that’s what you did,” Harry says. “I mean it’s just a job, Nick. It’s not who you are.”

“But I didn’t tell you. I didn’t tell you and the entire time, I was holed up writing a book about my life.”

Harry opens his mouth, pauses, pauses for so long that Nick starts counting, abandons it in frustration, starts again, and gets to thirty-four. “Your book’s about your life? Like an autobiography?”

“Yes.”

“Can I read it?”

“It'll be for sale in service stations and supermarkets, Harry, I won’t be able to fucking stop you.”

“You’re really famous enough for — ”

“Well fame’s relative init? It’s not a real thing, it only exists inside other people’s heads. You’re only famous to people who know who you are. Obviously I’m not that famous if you never heard of me.”

Harry sniffs a laugh. “You know, when we met, I thought you looked familiar.”

“You thought I looked — ”

Harry steps closer, somehow in Nick’s space before Nick’s had time to prepare for it even though he saw him coming. “But — then I thought... maybe I just wanted you to be?” He sets his mug down
on the counter behind Nick, looks up, and he’s so close, Nick can see the flare of brown right in the middle of the greenness of his eyes. It’s disconcerting. “You know what I mean?”

Nick doesn’t know anything. His heartbeat hammers so hard it’s probably vibrating the bobbles on his jumper.

Maybe Harry can tell, because he touches one of the stripes — tentative at first before flattening his palm right above Nick’s thumping heart. “Like — ” He looks up again. “That’s what it feels like to fancy someone, isn’t it? Familiar. They feel familiar.”

Not content with monitoring the coronary event Nick’s having, Harry’s fingers wind their way up his chest and round the back of Nick’s neck. Apparently there’s some button there Nick never knew about that makes him go panicky and tingly under his lungs.

“It sort of feels like… you already know them? When you like someone, when you know you like them, you feel like — ” His voice drops and his gaze flickers from Nick’s eyes to his lips. “ — connected. Like you know them before you know anything about them. And… you start picturing them — like making these little stories of you and them in your head — until you’ve convinced yourself you know how they’d react to everything. You take all these little bits of them and put them together until you think you know what their face is like when they’re laughing or crying or surprised — ” His mouth is so close, breath warm on Nick’s lip, his head tilted like he’s kissing the space between them. “ — until you think you know what they look like when they come.”

Nick’s not breathing. Legitimately not breathing.

“So I thought it was that. That that was why you seemed familiar. But it’s not.” Harry lets go of Nick’s neck and reaches for his tea again. “And that’s fine.”

And this is it, right, this is Nick’s punishment. Harry’s just going to leave him hanging here, to die of guilt and a hard-on. He looks at Nick over the top of his mug, eyes dancing. “Totally fine,” he says.

“If you don’t put that mug down right the fuck now, I swear to g—”

Harry ducks in for a kiss right at the same moment Nick pulls him in by his coat. He gets mostly a mouthful of snigger at first as Harry staggers into him and flails around him at the same time to push his mug across the worktop. His hand curls back around Nick’s neck as soon as it’s free of the handle, and he murmurs against Nick’s mouth when he can finally give it his full attention.

And it’s one of those kisses Nick thought all kisses would be like before he’d had enough of them to realise most are a passable kind of enjoyable at best. It makes him feel in awe of kissing again, as if he’s rediscovering the secret that there’s something people do which feels this good that’s just tongues and lips and teeth and sucking in each other’s ragged breath.

Harry presses in like he’s trying to climb Nick’s leg and Nick helps him along, hooking his hands under his arse and lifting him onto his toes so he can properly lock their mouths together. In the curl of Harry’s tongue against his, he misplaced his anger and his fear of rejection, loses his loneliness, kissing goodbye to his anxiety as Harry writhes closer, Nick’s name burbling out of the corner of his mouth.

“We should — ”

“Yeah,” Nick mumbles, already reaching for Harry’s belt to drag him out of the kitchen. “Yeah we should.”

He’s glad he didn’t take the plastic off the sofa, now.
Nick blinks at the room as the dark shadows start to mean something again. The back of his calves appear to be welded to the sofa. He shifts and peels one up with a squeak quickly followed by a grimace.

Somewhere during the exchange of orgasms, dusk descended. Nick’s not sure what they’re doing in the wider scheme of things, only that their clothes are all over the place and Harry’s on his chest and also probably stuck to the sofa plastic where he’s naked. Which is, well, entirely everywhere. They should probably relocate before Nick’s neighbours come home and cop an eyeful as they pull into their drives and their headlights light his lounge up like Blackpool Illuminations. His stomach growls and Harry moves, grumbling a protest into Nick’s chest hair.

God, he’s missed him, missed this. Reflexively, his hand goes to move Harry’s hair out of his face and kiss him properly awake, but he stops himself because he doesn’t know what this is yet.

“You want to get a take away or something?” he says.

He’s good at this, he thinks, at creating the appearance he’s ok with whatever, a skill acquired once he figured out that the only way to handle emotionally unavailable people is to be emotionally unavailable yourself, even if it’s a carefully constructed facade.

Harry buries himself in the crook of Nick’s neck. “Said I’d meet the others,” he says, nibbling a path up to his ear. “Come with?”

The pub’s not far but it’s definitely one of those ones only people who’ve never been to London before would choose: name that’s an animal and then a vegetable needlessly forced together, rock hard bench seating, and decor that’s pulled from the playbook of Irish theme pubs at the same time as exploding with sporting ephemera and vintage musical instruments. A group of American tourists are nestled in next to the fruit machines debating what on earth a hand shandy is, having encountered some graffiti offering it in the toilets, and a bunch of students are emptying out their wallets on the next table to see if they can collectively afford a two-for-one curry to divvy up between them.

Harry waves over the top of them to a table in the corner under a wonky euphonium, where Niall’s sitting with Liam and another guy in head-to-toe Adidas. “What d’you want?”

“Corona or something?” Nick says.

He leaves Harry to wait at the bar and heads over, arriving to an enthusiastic handshake from Niall and half a dozen questions at once about how he’s been doing.

“I’m good. You’re mended, then,” Nick says, gesturing to Niall’s foot, upon which he’s distinctly wearing a normal shoe.

“I am. Got my lucky socks on to prove it,” he says, proudly hitching up the hem of his jeans to show off a pair of garish rainbow shamrock socks.

“Hiya,” Liam says, hovering halfway between standing and sitting and clasping Nick’s hand with both of his. “Sorry they’re a bit sweaty. Man I cannot stop sweating today. I hope I’m not coming
He swipes at his forehead and the guy next to him rolls his eyes. “For the last time, Liam, it’s not possible to dehydrate your vocal chords just by sweating slightly more than normal.”

Nick takes a seat across the table.

“Er — this is my manager, Louis,” Liam says.

“Y’all right?” Louis says, as if it’s all one word, giving Nick a once over that stops just shy of being scathing.

“When’s your audition?” Nick says.

“Tomorrow, so I won’t be staying long. Early to bed, early to rise and all that. If you’ve got any last minute tips that’d be — ”

Louis sighs. “You don’t need any more advice, Liam, just relax, like I told you.”

“He was a judge.”

“Only for one season though, eh, so let’s not get excited,” Louis says.

Harry arrives with an unsubtle cough and two bottles of Corona. They’ve got slices of orange in the top.

“They’re out of limes,” he says, catching Nick noticing them. “I said this was fine but — I’m not sure it will be, actually.”

He takes the seat next to Nick, knocking Nick’s leg with his knee, holding his gaze as he pushes the orange down inside the neck of his bottle with his tongue before taking a hurried swig of the swell of foam.

Nick’s pulse races. In the cab on the way over, Harry could barely keep his teeth to himself, attached them to Nick’s neck like he was trying to recreate The Scream with a bite mark for a mouth. Nick rearranges his jumper just in case he succeeded and wonders how quickly it’s humanly possible to drink an orange-y beer and make your excuses.

“What about it then, Grimmy?” Liam says. “How’d I get a yes from Simon?”

“All pretty self-explanatory,” Nick says. “Be likeable, get the audience on side — if you get a chance, tell ’em how you sing ye olde songs at work to cheer up the old folk, just make it seem natural, like you’re fleshing yourself out not showing off or going for sympathy.”

Liam nods and gets his phone out, tapping away in his note app.

“What song you doing?”

“Usher, Make Me Wanna.”

“Strong choice.”

“You think?” Liam gives him hopeful teddy bear eyes.

“Absolutely. You hit people with the old classics at work story, they’ll expect some Ratpack nonsense, then you give ’em that — they’ll love it.”
“Thanks, man.”

Nick pokes the orange slice down into the neck of his bottle and hides his smile in a sip of his beer. “Tell Simon and Cheryl I said hi,” he adds quietly, and out of the corner of his eye, he catches Harry looking at him askance with a smile.

What the pub lacks in charm, it at least makes up for in cheap curry. Over microwaved naan and tikka masala, they hear all about Niall’s meeting with the deli, how they loved the yoghurt samples and they’ve agreed to take a hundred in various flavours over the next month to see how they sell and want him to come back with some of the frozen stuff when the weather gets better.

“It’s only a start,” he says, shovelling a forkful of rice to his mouth, “but I’m hopeful they’ll — ”

“Oh my god oh my god, it is, I love London, this shit always happens here! Didn’t I tell you you can’t go two days without seeing someone famous? I just got to — ”

Nick freezes in his seat with a mouthful of orangey beer foam. It’s one of the American tourists, who takes his glance over as confirmation they’re correct and starts to stand. He makes an expression that’s half wince and half grin.

The first time this happened, he was strolling down the road right after he recorded his second episode of *T4*. Three teenage girls stopped on the other side of the road, had a quick debate, then charged right for him. In the split second it took for them to arrive, he genuinely forgot everything about his own life and thought they were going to mug him. He’s got more used to it since then, but there’s always that tinge of fear, that someone might come over just to tell him how much they despise him, for things which may or may not be his fault.

He prepares for the switch into Nick Grimshaw Off The Telly mode, grimacing at the thought of having to stand there and say no, no jobs lined up, no, he has no plans for the rest of his life, no, he’s not sure either quite how that happened, bracing for Harry’s face when he gets an up close and personal look at all Nick’s Technicolor failings.

The American tourist arrives at their table, looking over their shoulder at the others for encouragement before announcing, “Hi, I’m a huge fan. Could I get a picture and maybe an autograph?”

“Of c—”

She pushes a paper napkin and a biro towards Harry.

Harry stops chewing the mouthful of naan he was working on, looks from the napkin, to her, to Nick, to Niall, and back again. Quizzically, he says, “Sure.”

He pinches his lips together, takes the biro, and air-writes as if he’s rehearsing his own signature before he asks, “So — er — what’s your name?”

“Kathy with a K.”

“Good choice,” Harry says, and scrawls:

*To Kathy with a K*

*Nice to meet you, don’t let them put an orange in your beer.*
Kathy takes it back with a grin. “How’s my girl Mabel?” she says.

“Fit as a fiddle,” Niall says, and if he’s bothered by Harry getting all the attention, all it looks like on his face is relief.

“It was so cold this morning, with her history of lung problems, I was real concerned about her, poor little darlin’, but on the live stream she looked so happy, running around outside.”

“She’ll outlive us all, that one. Right, Harry? Medical opinion?”

“Absolutely,” Harry says. “When she finally pops her hooves, I bet she’ll be so old they’ll put her in a moo-seum.”

Kathy doesn’t seem to know what to do with that, so Nick gets to his feet. “You want me to take a picture?”

Harry offers him a grateful if somewhat embarrassed smile, and Nick snaps one of Kathy in a Niall-Harry arm sandwich and then one of her and just Harry.

“Here, you’ll want one with Liam as well,” Louis says, cajoling Liam up off his stool and into frame. “He’s about to take *X Factor* by storm. Star in the making right here, love,” he says, “star — in — the — making. Liam Payne. Tell your friends. Find his Twitter.”

As Kathy retreats, grinning, back to her table, Louis is still shouting the channel and the show’s start date across the room, as if Liam getting through is a foregone conclusion.

“Right then,” Niall says. “Any of yous mind if I have the last poppadum?”

They see the others to the hotel and get a taxi back to Nick’s, ostensibly so Harry can pick Basil up. Once they’re there, Nick’s not sure it is ostensible at all, so he hovers in the hallway, walls and the painting he hates closing in around them like all the certainty of Harry’s teeth in his neck has dissipated.

“I should take her out,” he says, indicating Pig, where she’s lying belly-up at the foot of the stairs, rubbing her shoulder blades on the ball she snuck into the house when Nick was otherwise occupied.

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“Right then,” Niall says. “Any of yous mind if I have the last poppadum?”

They bump into each other’s arms as they walk, neither of them having drunk enough for that to be the reason. Liam was a man of his word and insisted on an early night so it’s not even closing time, plenty of people still up and watching telly, the light from *Newsnight* and *Modern Life is Goodish* spilling out onto the pavement.

Nick’s not intending to take them to the park rather than just a quick turn around the block, but that’s where they end up. There’s a guy in orange reflective gear jogging around the perimeter and a woman in a raincoat waiting for a schnauzer to pee, but other than that and a few stars struggling
through the clouds, they’ve the place to themselves. They do a lap around the trees with Nick tossing
the ball into clustered dead leaves for Pig, Basil scampering to try and beat her to it, and they talk
about Mabel and Niall’s yoghurt and Louis’s plan for Liam’s global domination.

Eventually they settle on a bench on top of a mound of earth with pretensions of being a hillock.

“It’s true, then,” Harry says, and Nick doesn’t know what he means until Harry tilts his head all the
way back and stares up at the sky.

“Must be annoying,” Nick says. “They make the effort to shine all the way here from another galaxy,
only to be defeated in the last ten feet by fucking lampposts.”

Harry looks over. “I don’t think they’re shining for our benefit,” he says. “I don’t think they’re doing
it to be seen. Not everyone’s a show off.”

“Is that supposed to be pointed?” Nick says. “If you think me wanting to be on the telly makes me
twatty and attention-seeking, you can just say so.”

He’s not sure he’s joking but Harry laughs.

“Why’d you give it up?” he says.

It makes Nick feel hollow, that Harry’s doing him the massive courtesy of thinking it was his own
choice. Did he not read the story of failed, sacked, over? He shrugs, frowns at the other side of the
park, where the jogger is now tangled with the schnauzer who apparently has a taste for hi-vis
clothing.

“Truth is,” he says, and then he’s not sure where he’s going with it.

Truth is, I burnt out like all my friends warned me I would and nearly offed myself at a wedding.

Truth is, I needed a break but in this industry people forget your face as soon as it’s not in theirs.

Truth is, it broke my heart, and I’d let it do it again, because sometimes I still think what you do is
more important than who you are.

He’s not sure someone like Harry could understand, though. How can he explain that the proudest
moment of his life was Terry Wogan calling him Grimberly? Is there even a way to articulate how it
feels to have gone from rubbing shoulders with his life-long idols, the supergiants of broadcasting, to
fading like a literal dying star? How can he put it into words that now, he’s just one of a million
pinpricks that used to dimly glitter in the sky? Knowing his luck, he’s one of the ones you can’t even
see from the city to top it all off.


“Like a revenge thing?”

Nick sniffs a mirthless laugh. “Yeah. Or that’s how it started — thought I’d have my say, tell all
about how it went down, how I got the we all know it’s not working, don’t we? speech twice inside a
year.”

He sighs. Normally when he talks about it, he couches it all in I was leaving anyway, more trouble
than it was worth that show, was time for me to move onwards and upwards, but Harry didn’t know
that Nick, so Nick doesn’t have to bother propping up that Nick’s facade.
“Worst part is, it’s like someone breaking up with you — it’s not you, it’s us as an organisation, it’s that you don’t quite fit with our aims for the show. They do it with this sort of fake niceness, make you feel bad for putting them in the position where they’ve got to fire you. It’d be a lot easier, honestly, if they just called one day and said you’re shit, fuck off.”

“I’m sure it’s their loss,” Harry says.

It’s such a cliché but he says it with such sincerity, Nick can’t help but smile. He hides it in taking the ball from Pig and tossing it as far as he can.

“You bring her here every day?” Harry says, eyes fixed on her as she races away, a streak of white hurdling the grass.

“Most days. There’s a bigger park we go to sometimes but it’s got a duck pond and it doesn’t matter how many times she learns she can’t walk on water, she still tries it.”

He’s about to say something about Harry being more interested in the minutiae of his life than the worst thing that’s ever happened to him when Harry leans his head on Nick’s shoulder.

“Like it here,” he says, and lets the ambiguity of whether he means the park, London, or Nick’s shoulder just sit there in the dark.

Nick twists the dog lead around his thumb, tugging it until the cord digs into his knuckle and it’s all he can feel.

He never pictured Harry here. He thought about him in Oldham, roaming through the fields where Nick grew up with Nick telling him stories about the chippy and the guy he used to perv on at the bus stop, considered him on holiday, thought about generic beds and shops and restaurants, but not here at the dog park: the place he was most likely to fit. Maybe he didn’t want to picture it for fear it’d never happen.

Harry scoots closer, gathering his coat about himself as a breeze that’s just the wrong side of nippy whisks up around them. “I bet it’s easy not to miss me here, right?”

“What kind of fucking question is— ”

Harry’s head snaps up. “Meant – at home, sometimes I think you’re going to be places because I got used to you being there. Like… it’s a surprise that you’re not there? So every few days it’s just… the death of my expectation over and over and over again. I wouldn’t want you to feel like that.”

“Harry– ”

“I’m just saying.” Harry drops his head onto Nick’s shoulder again. “I’m not – I’m just saying.”

They sit there for ages.

Nick wants to say a lot of things — he wants to say I’m so sad I bought a sofa I think I hate and the thing Annie said about trains, he wants to package it all neatly together so it seems as if those two things are something other than the desperate ramblings of a man who can’t say what he means. He wants to say what are we doing, where is this going, what did you come here on a flimsy excuse for, but mostly he just wants this bit to be over, to be certain one way or the other what Harry wants and what he feels. It hits him all at once how much he’d been keeping his identity as a barrier — if Harry knew he wouldn’t like you anymore, when he finds out he’ll be too angry to want anything to do with you — and now it’s not there.
He’s just Nick. Completely Nick. Waiting to see if Harry could love him. And he doesn’t know what to do with that, how to just wait. He’s not like Florence, he doesn’t think. He can’t arrive at a destination and then let patience do its thing. He can’t send postcards as idle hints and carry on living his life until Harry catches up with him, trusting in the inevitability that he will. He needs to know how Harry feels, so if he needs to, he can cut his losses, so he can cut his losses while the loss is still a part of him and not his entire being.

But how to say that. How to say that as anything other than: I love you.

He turns Pig’s lead over his finger and tugs it as tight as it’ll go. It’s probably going to leave a mark, a red channel in his flesh in which he’ll be able to keep things. Be quite handy: earrings if he ever goes back to wearing one, maybe coke, be a novelty at parties, that. None of it distracts him sufficiently from the press of Harry’s arm on his, the warm weight of his head on Nick’s shoulder, the insidious pulsing thought that Harry likes being here and why isn’t that enough. He should huff him off like a stranger on the tube who’s done a drunken topple onto him, but instead he just sits there, watching Basil dig up nothing in particular, tail wagging like he’s the first dog in history to discover the pleasure of dragging his nails through the dirt.

“We’re going to have to hose them down, the mucky – ”

Harry’s eyes are closed, slow breath curling out of his mouth.

Sensible person would wake him up, but Nick’s never been one of those, so he just sits there, numbness seeping into his hands and his feet and his arse. He should be annoyed – about this, about being taken by surprise, about Harry in general, really, but it won’t stick. Maybe you can never really be annoyed with someone when they’re asleep on your shoulder and you love them.

Pig scampers over, landing two muddy paws on Harry’s knee before he can stop her. “Eh, get – ”

Harry jolts, one hand scrabbling at Nick’s side before he emits a surprised snuffle. “Oh.” Harry lifts up off Nick’s shoulder, smiles at the chewed up ball Pig has dumped in his lap. “Thanks, Pig.”

“Been burning the candle both ends?”

Harry tucks his chin into the neck of his coat. “It’s fucking freezing.”

With a click, Nick attaches Pig to her lead and gets up, offering him a hand. “Come on.”

He pulls Harry to his feet, him staggering and ending up closer than Nick intended, bumping into him in a way Nick’s not sure is entirely attributable to lack of balance. “It’s late,” he says, even though it’s really not.

With a sigh, Harry scoops Basil up, and Nick doesn’t object when Harry worms the fingers of his other under Nick’s elbow and hooks their arms together for the walk back.

In the hallway which has felt too small all day, Nick toes his shoes off.

Harry does too, and it feels like a decision, but not one Nick’s taken part in. Harry leans in and plants a kiss on Nick’s mouth, and it’d be so easy to just go with it, to say fuck it, then go upstairs and fuck him and deal with everything else later.

But Nick’s done that before. He’s been doing it his whole life, in fact, pushing aside conversations he knew he should be instigating for fear they wouldn’t go the way he wanted. And yeah, having Harry finish the masterpiece he started on the side of Nick’s neck would feel great, but he’s got to know. He’s got to know why Harry came. It sure as fuck wasn’t to weigh in on his sofa and explore
the park by lamppost-defeated starlight.

Nick opens his eyes and doesn’t kiss him back.

“What?” Harry says, blinking at Nick from the end of his nose.

“What d’you think.”

“Right.” Harry shifts away, wraps his arms around himself to clutch at his own elbows. “You want to talk.”

“You came all this way, Harry, be rude not to.”

“Ok.”

In the kitchen, the mug Harry abandoned is still on the work surface. Nick collects it and puts it in the sink, fishes a bottle of wine out of the fridge and pours two glasses. He waits for Harry to say something, but Harry just leans on the counter and looks out into the darkness of the garden, frowning at his own reflection in the glass.

“You need a drink to get going?” Nick says. “Fucking hell, how bad is it?”

“It’s not — ” Harry’s gaze flicks to where Nick’s adding a would-be comic slosh of wine to the glasses in an attempt to keep things light. “Don’t think I came here to say something bad.”

“But there is something?”

Harry takes the glass Nick’s offering him. He swallows a mouthful of wine, rolls his toes against the floor tiles. “Well, I guess one thing — just — something I was thinking — and it’s not… I don’t really know how to — I just — I wanted to have a boyfriend.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been led to believe that entails,” Nick says, “but nothing I did falls outside those parameters I don’t think. Not unless I’ve been doing everything wrong for a really long time. Which — ” He sighs. “ — actually let’s face it, I’ve always been fucking useless at that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t mean — that you weren’t? Just meant — I wanted to just have a boyfriend? I wanted to go to the cinema and be inappropriate in the back row and to get nervous about meeting your parents.”

“Honestly on that score I’ve saved you a whole heap of trouble,” Nick mutters.

“You’re not listening.”

Nick rolls his eyes before pointedly fixing them on Harry and taking a seat at the breakfast bar. “I’m all ears.”

“I wanted to be boyfriends,” Harry says, and his forehead creases like it’s disappointed in his own explanation. “Like — just boyfriends?”

“What d’you think I wanted? To be an astronaut and his pet racoon?”

“No, but — everything went so slow. But then fast? Like it took you so long to even do anything, but then the next minute, you were saying you loved me and it was just — ” Harry makes this gesture like a man fleeing a burning building. “ — and then you left and I didn’t know if you’d ever come back.”
“I’m a rollercoaster, what can I say.”

“You can say you understand,” Harry says, a note of irritation in his voice. “You can say you understand and you want to go back to how things were and then — ”

“We can’t go back, it doesn’t — ”

“Forward, then. I don’t really care which direction we’re going, Nick. You’re the one who wanted to talk — can you at least try to see the important bit of what I’m saying?”

The impulse flashes through Nick’s head to snap back, a glib line about how it’d be easier to see the important bit if Harry didn’t hide it in a cloud of fucking nonsense. He’s good at that, flicking the switch in his head that means the harsher things he comes up with no longer go through the filtration process of whether they’ll actually get him what he wants. He’s destroyed the fragments of what might’ve turned into relationships a lot of times like that.

So he doesn’t do it, he just sits there, staring at the countertop and tracing the veins in the marble. He went too fast. Too soon, too much. He knew it, didn’t he?

But he can’t take it back. Love you doesn’t do that. Once it’s out it’s out. And he’s not sure he even wants to take it back, lock it back in his chest, because for once in his life, he felt something and instead of second-guessing it or being scared of it, he shared it. And it wasn’t what Harry wanted but that doesn’t make it less true. The anger which flared dissipates like the trail of white he’s tracing petering out into black.

“I can,” Nick says, and even though he does it quietly, it’s still a surprise to himself he’s saying anything at all. “I can see the important bits. S’just easier init to argue about the bits that don’t matter.”

He shifts on his chair and probably he’s waiting for Harry to say something but Harry doesn’t, just takes a seat at the other end of the breakfast bar. “Just say it. Say I’m a disaster of a human being and — ”

“Nick, that’s not — ”

“I am. If you’ve not noticed, it’s only because you spend half your life making poorly animals better and the rest taking raw ingredients and making them more than they were, so you think I’m one of those things, and I’m neither.”

He leaves a gap for Harry to protest but Harry just rolls the stem of his wine glass between his fingers, eyes on the contents.

“But if you’re waiting for me to say I’m sorry for saying I love you, then I’ll save you the trouble. I’m not going to,” Nick says, “because I’m not. I’m not sorry I said it, even though it made things… weird. I can’t play games, Harry. I’m tired of pretending things don’t mean something to me when they do. And I don’t see why — ” He stops to push down the lump rising in his throat. “The things you wanted — the cinema and stuff — I don’t see why what I said has to get in the way of that. It’s not like they ask you when you buy the tickets what the state of your emotional connection is and if you click the wrong box you don’t get to go in. And if you wanted to just hook up or have fun or whatever, then really you should’ve just fucking said so. If you think I can’t be in love with someone but act like what we’re doing is no big deal then you’ve severely underestimated my ability to — ”

“You just said you can’t pretend.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe pretending to be ok with things nearly killed me and I ran away to the
countryside and that’s what made me too tired to do it anymore. But at least I would’ve known if you’d said something.”

Harry fixates on his hands.

Nick thinks about everything and nothing.

He used to watch arguments on *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* and they always neatly truncated themselves in time for the credits — there’d either be a thundering crescendo of a cliff-hanger or a declaration of feeling that’d have them falling together in a hug, eyes gritted shut, relief and suppressed heartbreak on their faces — but no one ever bothered to script how to sit with someone like this, with nothing left to say and a swell of feeling he can’t put a name to.

He’s not even sure they’re arguing.

So time just passes until the clock on the oven says 12.38.

“You staying?” Nick says and his voice is croaky with not saying the things he meant to.

“Is that all right?”

Nick’s not sure, but he nods.

Upstairs, there’s no suggestion Harry might take one of the guest rooms. He slips into Nick’s en suite, opens the cupboards until he finds a flannel and a towel. The gush of the water over his hands doesn’t really hide the gasping breaths he’s taking.

Nick wishes he had it in him to knock on the door and ask if he’s ok, and when it opens, wrap him up in a hug and tell him he loves him and everything will work out. He could’ve been that person, maybe, once upon a time, but even if he still had it in him, it’s not what Harry wants, is it, so he just puts his clothes away and gets into bed and turns the light off.

By the time Harry joins him, Nick’s very nearly genuinely asleep. He murmurs at the press of Harry to his back, forgetting for a moment he’s pissed off — or was supposed to be, he thinks. He’s not even really sure anymore, only that his body relaxes at Harry’s touch and then jerks, like it’s remembered it’s not really safe to let its guard down.

Harry kisses the back of his neck, murmurs, “I’m sorry,” and Nick’s not intending to let himself fall asleep like that, but he does, anyway.
The sun filtering in through the gap in the curtains is the thin, pale yellow kind, and for just a moment, Nick basks in the warmth of the duvet and how soft it feels skating over his arm as someone moves. He blinks into the day, scrubbing at his eyes, and behind him, Harry drops his phone onto the bedside table with a small clunk.

“Hey,” he says. He shifts from where he was apparently propped up on the pillows to Nick’s shoulder, presses his mouth to it as Nick rolls onto his back. He stays there, almost too close, and the shadows under his eyes say he didn’t sleep much, either last night or lately in general. He’s hesitant and Nick should probably say or do something, but the ability seems to have ebbed out of him, so he just lies there, clutching the duvet from underneath.

Harry kisses the hole in Nick’s t-shirt — a cigarette burn he got from hugging someone who wasn’t expecting it at a festival too many years ago to remember any more about it than that. He moves up, steadying himself with a hand on Nick’s chest, leaning right over him, warm and heavy and probably going for a real kiss.

Inside Nick’s chest, there’s a panicked stampede at the thought. If he lets Harry kiss him right now, it’ll crack him open. He catches Harry’s head and holds him still. Their gazes lock. He’s not sure even what he’s trying to say but Harry shrinks a little from it, ducks down out of his eye line and kisses over his t-shirt.

Nick breathes out, long and jagged, swirl of interest in his belly as Harry mouths at the fabric. He moves lower, rucking up the aged cotton with his hands as he makes his way down. When he gets to Nick’s stomach, it’s exposed, and he kisses the place where the hem ends and skin begins with a fractured sigh that goes straight to Nick’s dick. He presses his tongue to the trail of hair that leads lower, looks up. And Nick should say yes — or more probably no — but instead, he pushes him down and hides his eyes behind his forearm.

While Harry’s in the shower, Nick makes tea again. He weighs the water in the kettle to make sure there’s enough for two, thinking vaguely about love and if he has enough of that for two, too. There’s a shushing noise in the corner and Nick looks over to where Basil’s trying to tug an old circular from the local councillor out of the recycling bin.

“No,” Nick says, and darts over, reaching for the paper and trying to disengage Basil’s jaw from it without upsetting him. “What are you — it’s bad for you — it’ll make you sick.”

He wins the tug of war but feels so bad about the dejected face Basil makes that he gives him one of Pig’s bone-shaped treats, even though it’s approximately half his body length.

He’s sitting at the counter with a mug of tea, watching the steam rise from Harry’s and Basil gnawing away, when Harry pads down the stairs. His hair’s wet and piled on top of his head slightly off centre and he’s pinched one of Nick’s jumpers and rolled back the cuffs. He looks like he belongs here — even before he takes the mug that’s waiting for him, squeezes Nick’s arm, kisses his cheek, and asks what’s for breakfast.
“I’ve got this sourdough bread that makes ok toast or some kind of granola with mulberries in,” Nick says. “They’re this year’s kale. Give you the insides of a twenty year old. Not that you need that, ‘course.”

Harry flips the cupboards open one at a time, peering at the contents until he finds the granola. He skims the front of the packet with his lip pressed between his teeth and then drags two bowls down and watches as the clusters tumble out into them. He tops both of them off with almond milk and blueberries from the fridge, joins Nick at the counter, facing him and the garden, bare foot sneaking from his own stool to rub at Nick’s ankle.

He smiles around his spoon as he eats and it’s nice, but also weird, because Nick’s not sure they’re together and not sure they’re not, either.

“What?” Nick drops a spoonful of granola down his front. “Oh — bloody hell.” He wipes at the spilled milk with his cuff, trying to make out from the angle of Harry’s eyebrows how to respond to the news. “What happened? Were they really hard or — ” Harry grimaces and Nick’s heart sinks. “Wasn’t because of me, was it? Like — all this — it didn’t… put you off?”

“No,” Harry says, almost too quickly. “No — Nick — no, really. I knew the answers but I fucked a couple up just enough not to pass. I can retake them, it’s no big deal.”

Harry stares at him in earnest and Nick frowns at him in question.

“It’s fine,” Harry says, but any attempt at breeziness is lost under the tinge of desperation. “I’m fine. It’s fine.”

“It’s obviously fucking not, Harry. Why would you — ”

“I already had these, like, three lives, ok?” Harry says. “And I didn’t know how to choose between them and then everything with you happened and it just — it got too complicated. I went from three lives to, like, nine and I couldn’t handle it, all right? I couldn’t. So I failed to buy myself some time. It was stupid but I just —” Harry sucks the corner of his mouth in and chews on it. “—it didn’t seem it at the time.”

Nick tries to pick out on his face which emotion is dominant, the anger or the embarrassment or the desperate desire not to be having the conversation. He gets the latter part – this is not exactly what he imagined when he asked. He thought he was in for a ‘yeah, fine’ to which he’d offer congratulations and maybe try and clear what’s left of last night’s air with a you’re-so-clever hug.

A bit of him wonders whether Harry ran away from this, if that’s why he’s here. He tries to make sense of it, how Harry, who’s scraped him off the emotional floor and stacked him up again could look at all his options and decide fucking things up on purpose was the way to go.

“I’ve done some unconventional coping in my time, but – ” Nick trails off when Harry grimaces again. Whatever this was about, it’s not a joke to him. “Does your mum know?”
“That I failed? Yeah.”

“But does she know you did it on purpose?”

Harry shakes his head. “She made me a cake for trying my hardest and to wish me better luck next time. I’ve never eaten anything that tasted so — I mean don’t get me wrong, the cake was technically amazing because she makes incredible buttercream — but it was also like… swallowing gravel. Emotional gravel.” He focuses on his bowl. “I never really lied to her before, not like that.”

“Oh, love,” Nick says, softly, and he reaches across the breakfast bar to hook his fingers in the roll of jumper at Harry’s wrist. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“How? How was I supposed to tell her I did something like that after she made me a fucking cake?”

“Not to her, Harry. To me. You could’ve said something to me. Ideally before you had to… fail yourself.”

Harry looks down again.

“Did you think I wouldn’t understand? Or that I wouldn’t care?”

Harry keeps his eyes on the marble countertop and Nick bites back a joke about not being so old he doesn’t remember what it was like to be cramming for exams – or in his case, lying about cramming for exams and sneaking out to go clubbing. But that’s not what this is. Harry didn’t prepare insufficiently or write the wrong number of essays because he was hungover and panicky, he methodically made sure he didn’t make the grade. Nick tries to imagine doing that – voluntarily failing, ensuring that he’d have to re-sit at some point, rather than doing the bare minimum and jubilantly tossing his text books into the canal.

He waits for an answer, but Harry doesn’t offer one. Maybe it was both. Maybe he thought Nick fucked off on holiday, leaving everything else behind. Maybe that’s what it looked like. Harry didn’t know he was with Nick all the time, robbing cocktails of everything but the promised reprieve of alcohol, that the feel of the sunshine was a poor imitation of Harry trying to lick the freckles off his skin, that he kept seeing in the faces of strangers the way Harry covers his mouth when he laughs. He doesn’t know that when Nick came back, a house Harry had never previously been in suddenly felt bereft of him, that walking Pig now feels like going to pick him up but somehow never arriving. He wishes Harry would just say yeah, that’s it, I thought you didn’t care so he could explain, but Harry doesn’t say anything.

“I got a lot of skills, Harry, but mind reading’s not one of them,” Nick says.

Nick’s counter top is getting more attention than it’s ever had before. Nick shifts his bowl off to the side so he can lean further across it, into Harry’s eye line. He gives a tug to Harry’s sleeve, hoping he’s making the kind of face people want to talk to when they’re upset, the kind people want to trust with their problems, the kind that says Nick’s trying his best. His face fails to crack Harry’s stony silence though, so Nick decides to try his old standby, soft jokes and playing stupider than he is.

“So… about the nine lives thing. What’s that about, then? Is it anything to do with cats? You trying to tell me you’re secretly part feline? You got those big green eyes, I should’ve known.”

“It’s not that.”

Harry’s jaw tightens and he pokes at his cereal. It all looks like he’s not going to say anything else, but Nick just waits.
It claws at him to do it, but he waits.

“Could handle the present, just not the future, and it got so close so fast, Nick.”

His voice has cracks in it and Nick knows he needs to be careful what he says next. It feels like one of those make or break things, that if he fucks this up, Harry won’t ever talk to him about anything important ever again.

“Future does that sometimes,” Nick says. “Comes at you when you’re not ready like some kind of fucking ninja.”

Harry smiles, all timid and small, but Nick can see it, like he did when he was on the radio, the exact second Harry decides it’s safe to tell him more. He sighs, unhunches his shoulders just a little. “It’s like there’s the Bakery, and the vet’s, and the Argus,” Harry says, ticking them off on his fingers one by one. “And I like doing all of them, but I can’t carry on doing that, can I?”

“Why not?” Nick says, although he might as well still have the impression of Harry’s head on his shoulder where he nodded off. He should’ve known that the early mornings and late nights would take their toll; he’s been there enough times himself to spot the signs.

“Barbara always wants me to do more hours and the vet does too, and they both think the other one’s a waste of time. There’s a lot of pressure and – I felt like I needed to choose, to pick a future.” He tucks his elbows into his sides and stares at his granola. “But I didn’t know how.”

“I thought the Bakery was just a part-time thing while you qualified?”

“It was,” Harry says. “At first. But I like it. I like making stuff and meeting people – they’re always happy when they leave, you know? And working at All Creatures – it’s great – but it’s hard, sometimes. Not everyone leaves with good news. So I was already torn and then you—” He pauses, trying several words in his mouth before he settles on one. “—complicated it? So much so I made a spreadsheet for all the options,” he says, with a soft snort at himself.

“A spreadsheet?”

“Yeah. I was trying to work out how things would go with each, like, life choice and cross-referencing it with the way things might go with us — like me working at the Bakery or the vet if you don’t want to be with me anymore, versus we’re together with you coming back to Middling Slaughter, versus us being together with you being in London.”

He shifts on his stool and drowns a mulberry with the tip of his finger. The thought of him making a spreadsheet like that is at once hilarious and heart wrenching and Nick hopes neither shows on his face. He tugs on the bit of his jumper he’s still fingering in a show of quiet support, trying to say with it that he’s sorry he let himself get distracted by his own stuff.

“That’s how you got from three to nine,” Nick say. Though he can’t help picturing himself in one of the cells, getting highlighted and deleted for not noticing anything was wrong, he asks, “So what were your findings?”

“Well,” Harry says, and he shifts on his seat again. “If I stayed at the Bakery or the vet and you stayed in Middling Slaughter, that would probably be fine, I thought? We could share the Argus and I’d just have to commit to one job and quit the other and deal with someone’s disappointment. Difficult, but… doable.” He tilts his head and looks up. “But if I stayed at the Bakery and you moved back to London, which I thought you probably would, well, I’d only get one day off? And if I left on Saturday right after my shift, I’d arrive after lunchtime and so we’d only really have the
afternoon and then I’d have to drive back on Sunday? And I’d be tired, I’d need to go to sleep early, and where’s that leave the Argus? So I thought maybe choosing the vet would work better. But I’d be on call sometimes — so coming to see you wouldn’t always be that easy — and I wasn’t sure how we’d do the Argus if you weren’t there? Or if you’d want to do it at all, now I know you’re used to, like, actual facilities and doing stuff properly. And I could just do the Argus, obviously, put all my effort into it — then I’d set my own schedule pretty much, which would be great – but if I did that, I wouldn’t have any money at all for petrol or train tickets because loving doing something doesn’t mean you’re good at it.”

Nick scuffs his arm. “If that’s what you wanted though, I could pay — ”

“You’d pay for everything, Nick?” he says, and there’s something imploring about it. “When you got bored of staying over at my mum’s, would you pay my rent so I could get somewhere of my own? Because mum’s still seeing that guy — it’s going pretty well — and I keep thinking what if she wants her space? Or what if she wants him to move in? It’s not big enough for all of us and I’ve got Basil to think about now too.”

Nick wants to ask a hundred things, like when it was decided Basil would stay with Harry and how he feels about Mrs Whitstable leaving, when that’s happening, how her hip is, is he ok now with his mum having a boyfriend, has he met him, did he like him? When did so many gaps open up in his understanding of Harry’s life?

Harry hooks his toes over the bar on Nick’s stool so his foot’s between Nick’s, not touching, just there.

“And when you said… what you said,” Harry says, as deliberate as a ham-fisted man threading a needle, “it was like… shit, now do I need to think about what happens if you want us to move in together? Is that where this is going? Am I ready for that?” His gaze darts up to meet Nick’s, like he’s checking Nick’s following. “And where would we live, anyway? Am I moving to London? How do I pay for that? And if I am moving to London, then what’s the point of trying to decide between the Bakery and All Creatures Great and Small and the Argus if I’m giving them all up? So now my life plan is what, exactly? I’m in London with no job at all? What would your family think of you basically having some freeloader living with you? What would your friends think? You going to introduce me to Alexa Chung and I’ll talk to her about, like, scones and goat husbandry?”

“Alexa would be bloody fascinated if you talked to her about goat husbandry.”

Harry lets out a stiff sigh and kicks the bar on Nick’s stool. “It’s not — was just a lot to think about all at once.”

Nick murmurs, puts his toes over Harry’s like that might make up for not listening properly.

“It’s like everyone else knows what they’re doing and I’m just… making spreadsheets.”

He supposes it does look like that – Mrs W off with Florence, Anne and her new man, Niall and his plan for artisan yoghurt world domination, Liam and the \textit{X Factor}. Nick starts a dozen sentence in his head, offers for Harry to move in here if that’s what he wants, statements about how it’s none of his family’s business how they divide the gas bill, a clumsy explanation that when he said I love you, he didn’t mean for it to be a trap. None of it feels right. He goes back over everything Harry just said and tries to hear the important bit, narrow it down to: Harry was scared, not knowing what the future looked like when it wouldn’t stay put; when Harry was thinking about all this, he was making Nick a part of his future in all the variations of it. Even in the one where they weren’t together, it was because Nick didn’t want to be.
“Nothing wrong with a spreadsheet if it helps you sort things out?”

“To be honest, my head was too full of you not being there to do it properly. Half the cells just ended up being your name.”

Nick’s insides collapse. He tugs on Harry’s sleeve until he’s close enough to wrap his arms around and pulls him in tight, even though it requires taking a breakfast bar to the sternum and very nearly upsetting two bowls of quite expensive granola. He’s not expecting it, but Harry buries his face in Nick’s neck, his breath hot over a noise like he’s trying to put a stopper in a sob.

“Hey, what’s – ”

Harry clutches for Nick’s arm and it burbles up out of him, watery and frantic, “It’s such a mess. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s ok,” Nick says, and he rocks them side to side as if that proves it. “It’s ok, there’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Inside, he’s imploding, but Nick tries to radiate calm understanding, scuffs Harry’s shoulder in the hope it’s comforting. “You just should’ve said, you didn’t have to worry about all that on your own. We could’ve talked, we could’ve — ”

“I didn’t — I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t even want to think about it. I just wanted — I don’t know. I don’t know what I wanted.”

“Yes you do,” Nick says, and Harry squeezes his arm and mumbles a disagreement. “You said it last night. You said you just wanted a boyfriend. You were pretty clear, Harry.”

Harry mutters how stupid that was into Nick’s jumper.

“No, no it wasn’t. It’s not stupid. Not at all.”

Nick turns to kiss Harry’s head, gets a mouthful of Harry’s damp hair. He stays there for a moment, closing his eyes, kicking himself for not broaching the subject sooner of what they’d do when Nick didn’t have an excuse to stay in the village anymore. He hadn’t intended for Harry to worry about it – god, hadn’t imagined that he’d worry, let alone that he’d get himself in such a state he’d make a spreadsheet.

He moves Harry away gently with his shoulder, smoothing the strands of his hair which’ve come loose back with his hands until he can see Harry’s face. “Hey, it’s ok,” he says, trying to make Harry meet his eye so he can see how much Nick means it. “Everything just got a bit too much for you, right?”

Harry’s eyes roll away but he nods. There are tears on his lashes but he’s not paying them any attention so Nick decides not to overreact to them either. He thumbs Harry’s cheek and Harry turns into his hand, like he’s hiding. “I get it. I think I get it, now. With me – you just needed something nice and quiet and simple — to take your time with it all, because you already had so much to think about. That’s what you meant?”

Harry nods, knocks his temple against Nick’s cheek. He always seemed so steady, so in control, so calm about everything, Nick never would’ve guessed he had all that chaos in his head. He rubs at Harry’s arm, trying to convey that he’s sorry for not seeing it, for adding to it, for not thinking about it before spewing his feelings everywhere.

He folds Harry into himself and just holds him for a minute, until Harry’s breathing normally again
and some of the tension has seeped out of his body.

“You want some advice?” Nick says.

“What you got?”

“Nowt,” Nick says, “but I can call my mate Annie Mac.”

Harry laughs, which is exactly what Nick was going for, so he kisses the corner of it as it turns into a smile. “You know you don’t have to work it all out now, don’t you?” Nick says.

Harry presses his lips together, like he doesn’t quite believe it but doesn’t want to argue about it either.

“And… any decision you make isn’t lifelong and binding,” Nick says. “You could do one thing for a bit and see how it goes and if you don’t like it, pack it in.” He’s not sure he’s being any help so he goes back to being quiet for a moment, stroking over Harry’s hair. “You feel better now you’ve said it all, at least?”

“A bit, I guess,” Harry says.

His fingers linger on Nick’s arm, tracing patterns only he can see.

The only time Nick ever saw him like this before was when he found out about Mrs Whitstable. He should’ve spotted it, how badly Harry handles change.

“You’re wearing your bracelet,” Harry says, runs his fingers around the thin silver bangle.

‘Course I am,” Nick says. “Haven’t taken it off, have I, since the moment I found it snuck into my bag.”

Harry’s sniff of amusement gives way to a tiny smile and he retreats to his own half of the breakfast bar, to soggy granola and surreptitiously wiping his eyes on his sleeve. “What we going to do today?” he says.

Nick knows a conversation ender when he hears one, and something in Harry’s face makes Nick think of Mrs Whitstable deciding to put on a show even though her feelings had unexpectedly Pandora-ed it out of a shoebox.

“You want me to take you out, show you and Basil the sights?”

Harry picks up his spoon and nods. “Yeah, that’d be nice. I said I’d go and see Liam sing later, though? I’m supposed to be there for like four I think? You could come. Or would that be weird?”


“Home. Thought we’d head off around dinner time.”

“You’ll be lucky,” Nick says. “Those auditions drag on all bleeding night.”

“Really? I better pick up some dehydration sachets. Liam’ll sweat himself to a husk.”

Nick laughs, even though he doesn’t quite feel like it, and Harry smiles into his cereal. Nothing’s quite been resolved, and it feels at once a little better and worse than it did.
They spend the day at various attractions, touristy and not. Nick takes Harry to Primrose Hill for a walk and a coffee and a cupcake with pink icing, and then to the BBC to peer in the window while Nick tells him stories about the time he dressed like a crab and now he can’t remember why. They go down Regent Street and all the way to Trafalgar Square, where Nick takes a picture of Harry sitting on one of the lions with Basil in his lap and Harry buys his mum a t-shirt which says I Heart LDN in dodgy print. They grab a late lunch at Nick’s favourite restaurant and steal bits of each other’s dishes like the kind of people Nick hates, and then before he knows it, it’s time to drive Harry to Wembley.

He pulls up at the curb just round the corner from the main entrance, where swarms of people are clustered on the steps, huddled over Starbucks cups and debating if they’ve time to get a Nando’s.

“Reckon if you go and ask there, they’ll tell you where you got to be,” Nick says, gesturing beyond the windscreen to where three stewards in yellow neon are juggling hand stamps and laughing at each other’s jokes to stay warm.

“Thanks,” Harry says, and he goes shy for a second as he adds, “for today generally, too. I had a really nice time.”

“Should hope so,” Nick says. “Not every day you get to mount a statue of a lion and have the best cupcakes in the world.”

“Second best, after mine.”

“I don’t remember having one of yours.”

“They’re a spring-summer cake.”

“Cakes have seasons now?”

“ ‘Course,” Harry says. “For the ideal sponge, you need to use butter made from milk that came from cows fed on new grass shoots. This is why mine are superior.”

Nick rolls his eyes, but really he’s just putting off saying goodbye. All the way here, he debated it, what he was going to say, whether it should be apology or statement or something else entirely, and now they’re sitting here, the sat nav blinking about having reached their destination when it feels like nothing of the sort. He wishes it would give him more useful directions, like how to get from here to everything being ok again, because they’ve had a nice day, and in it he can see how things might work, but it’s not quite –

“I’ll whip you some up, some time,” Harry says, and he’s leaning in with a flicker of flirtation.

“Will you do me red velvet?” Nick says. Harry’s looking at his mouth, going in for a real kiss, and this time, he doesn’t stop Harry, just inches in to meet him halfway. “ ‘They’re my favourite.’”

“I’ll do you anything you want,” he says, turning the last word into a kiss.

Behind them, a van honks.

Harry turns in his seat. “We’re causing a traffic jam,” he says, with a gloriously unconcerned
chuckle, and when he turns back, Nick catches his chin and brings him back in.

“Only a little one,” he murmurs, right against Harry’s bottom lip. “Let ‘em fucking wait.”

It’s not an earthshattering kiss, not one with volcanoes and hurricanes in it, not one some old rocker would write songs about using apocalyptic metaphors and allusions to souls. It’s just soft and slow and serious, and in it, Nick’s sure he can hear Harry’s heartbeat in his ears.

When they break apart, Nick rubs his knuckles on the top of Basil’s head. He’s patiently sat on Harry’s lap and if Nick didn’t know better, he’d say Basil was staring out of the window, pointedly ignoring them and ever so slightly blushing. “Take care of him, you hear?” Nick says. “He’s feeling a bit fragile right now, so I need you to look out for him – no chomping paper and stressing him out.”

“I’m fine, Nick,” Harry says, but he’s smiling, too.

Another honk.

With a sigh and a final kiss, Harry gets out.

Nick doesn’t know when he’ll see him again. They haven’t planned it — or anything — and Nick feels fidgety about it, but he doesn’t want to heap the pressure on. He winds the window down and thinks about something Florence said about not saying goodbye, just letting now continue.

“I’ll see you, then,” he says, and Harry waves and backs away towards the trestle tables and laminated A4 that marks the entrance to the studio.

Upstairs, beyond the glass, there’s a camera crew doing an interview and right outside the door, there are banners with the new logo and a giant yellow splash that screams opportunity and desperation. Nick can’t believe that being on the other side of that used to be ordinary to him.

“Tell Liam I said good luck? And text me how it’s going, yeah?”

He’s sort of waiting for Harry to give him a sign to say more than that, but Harry just replies, “Will do.”

At another honk, this one long with impatience, Nick turns the radio on and pulls away, Harry waving Basil’s paw at him in his rear-view mirror.

He drives home, mumbling along to the new Troye Sivan song and talking back to Alice Levine. He potters about, loading their breakfast things into the dishwasher, and checks his email to find the one from his agent he’s been waiting for about his book:

Nick —

It’s fab it’s reallyfab reallyreallyfab.

Just wonder darling if the ending is finished? It ever so slightly peters out.

Do you want to take another pass at it before I send it on?

Nick can’t even remember what ending he went with, which he supposes says it all. He replies to say sure because at least it gives him something to do next week, and gets ready for dinner, distracted by his phone buzzing with a picture of Liam emoting at a wall in what looks distinctly like a toilet, Niall sitting in the sink.
The restaurant is one of those ones in the bottom of a five star hotel, where the table cloths drape in impeccable arches and the menus read like a thesaurus which only contains synonyms for sauce and steak. It’s the kind of place Nick would bring someone on a date when he thought they were wavering on him, trying to show off the life he could provide if only they’d put up with him.

Florence is incredible company. She pours anecdotes like other people pour wine, hunching her shoulders and scrunching up her nose as she relives the details, like the time she and Joan were invited to a party by Keith Richards, not realising until they got there it was the kind of party where no one really wears any clothes.

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t know what to do — where to look — where to put my hands. I found a vase and pretended I thought it was terribly interesting. You know, even a Rolling Stone finds it difficult to maintain an erection when you’re talking about cracks in the glazing.”

Nick notes it for future so he can pass it on at parties, but it fills him with less glee than it would’ve done a year ago. Since he saw the X Factor logo, the crowds, the camera crew, he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about how nothing about the life he used to relish feels real. Maybe it’s a consequence of writing it down, editing and fictionalising, telling half-truths that are more palatable to read, even for himself. Maybe it’s an inevitability of falling into this puddle of self-reflection that the more you look at something, the more it seems like an illusion.

*It just peters out.*

Did she really mean his book, or his life?

“You all right, darling?”

“Yeah. I just had a long day. Or not long. Just — full.” Nick takes a sip of his wine. It’s impeccably chosen but he’s not in the mood. He fiddles with his water glass. “All them people, like Keith Richards and Mick Jagger — do you think they can feel it? You think they can feel that they’re not really real to people? They’re just stories people tell?”

“I think if they do, they like it,” Florence says. “It’s a kind of immortality isn’t it, to exist not solely in one’s body but in the words of others, too?”

“Hmmm.”

“You know I used to listen to you on the radio,” Florence says.

“What? Shut up.”

Florence gives him a wry smile. “I know at my age I’m supposed to be addicted to Women’s Bits Hour or whatever it’s called but — it sounded like home, you see. Although the music was occasionally frightful, it was the frequency I remembered from when I lived here. I remember it so clearly, the day it was announced pirate radio had found itself on solid ground and there it was, change — literally on the air.”

“You going to tell me a story about Noel Edmonds that’ll make me need therapy?”
“I’ve got two really good ones,” she says, “but the point I was trying to make is — you see, while you think we’re strangers, we’re not really. I’ve been enormously fond of you for ages, quite without you knowing. I do so miss the stories you used to share about spilled milk and crashing your car at the supermarket. Perhaps you’d like a turn.”

Nick smiles. He’s got stories all right – he could tell her about Lady Gaga or Timberlake, things he saw backstage at the BRITs or the NTAs, but as he sits there, deciding, he realises that he doesn’t want to talk about any of it.

Instead, he tells her about Harry, about how when they met, Nick thought there were at least two of him, how Harry taught him to make chutney and now will always be part of any cheese sandwich Nick makes. He spins it like a story he’d tell on the radio, turning up the details so she’s laughing in all the right places, gripping her fork when he gets to the cliff-hanger of Christmas and his declaration. He jokes about how Harry ran away from him without even going anyway, and how since, Nick’s been trying to do some kind of keep calm and carry on thing, but it just makes him feel like a hamster on a wheel.

“So I’ve got a boyfriend,” Nick says. “Only he’s not a boyfriend boyfriend, he’s a not quite boyfriend who lives halfway across the country and has nine lives, none of which I really fit in.”

“You haven’t realised yet,” she says.

“Realised what?”

“I won’t spoil it for you. You’ll get there.”

Her eyes sparkle in the candlelight and they’re so warm, Nick can’t even be annoyed. It’s not like he was looking for advice – he just wanted to tell her about him – and it feels like he hasn’t done that in ages, just talked about something, someone, who was on his mind. He got used to chunking up his life as filler between records, to Fiona or Annie or Matt saying what are you like? and being done with whatever it was. It was a way of acknowledging these sometimes painful things that had happened, but in a way, shrinking them in the telling so he could squeeze around them instead of having them lodged in his way. He’s missed it.

As he sits there, watching a waiter set fire to something at the next table, he thinks: so you told him you love him and he didn’t say it back. So what? He still wants to be your boyfriend and he thinks about you in his future. Maybe you can just have days like today and do that for a bit. Maybe you can wait when waiting looks like that.

He watches the candlelight glint off Florence’s bracelets and wonders if Mrs Whitstable ever just sits and can’t get her breath because Florence is back in her life, apparently not bruised by the years of quietly hoping.

“Tell me to mind my own if you want,” Nick says, “but you know how you used to write to Mrs Whit – to Joan, when you used to send her postcards from all around the world filled with what you were doing and thinking –” If Florence is surprised he knows the details, it doesn’t cause a ripple in her impeccably made-up forehead, so Nick presses on. “Why’d you stop?”

“Ahhhh,” she says, and as she tilts her head, the cluster of rubies making flame shapes on her ear lobes glitter like they’ve come to life. “I didn’t, not really. Do you know, I’ve got them all somewhere, the ones I didn’t send – from Spain, Australia, New Zealand, from the Andes – all of them together.”

“So what,” Nick says, “you’d write ‘em but not send ‘em? You just thought there was no point
“Not quite,” she says. “One day, I was just sitting at a writing desk in a fabulous suite in Mallorca with a postcard in front of me, and I couldn’t think of a single thing to write. Not about the oranges, which tasted of sunshine, not about the weather, which was all sunshine, not about the house of Robert Graves I’d visited earlier which I knew Joanie would’ve been delighted by. Not a single thing. I sat there tormented by the blankness of that damn postcard. So I put it in my handbag. I took it to the beach, to a lovely little bar with grapes in the awning, on a tremendously terrifying drive through the mountains, but whenever I took it out and tried to write it, there was nothing there. By the time I had to leave for the airport, I was sure I’d feel inspired at the last minute and some kind soul would help me find a post box. But I arrived there and didn’t, boarded the plane and didn’t, drove all the way home, stared at it and didn’t – this bloody blank box on the back of a postcard just refused to be filled. It sat on my dressing table for weeks. And a month rolled into the next, the way they’re wont to do sometimes, and when I tried again with a different postcard, a different location, a different list of things to say, again, I just… couldn’t. So I took it home and put it with the other and soon enough, I had a collection of them, entirely by accident. They’re all in a box in the wardrobe – I’ll have to do something with them, I expect.”

Words unsaid, left in boxes. Is the world secretly littered with them?

“Did you wonder what she’d think when they stopped coming?” Nick says.

“I’ll confess,” Florence says, “after a year or so, a tiny, tiny part of me clung to the idea that having not received anything in so long, she might think I’d passed away – and that maybe she’d look me up and be so relieved to find me still alive and kicking she’d get in touch. But that wasn’t my intention. I just ran out of these surface things to talk about. There’s a finite amount of times one can talk about the weather or the local specialities when one means something else.” She wrinkles up her nose. “I reached my limit.”

“You got a lot to catch up on,” Nick says.

“Indeed, and I think we’ll give it a ruddy good shot,” she says, and lifts her glass in toast. “My life so far, for all its perks, has been entirely made of frippery, been spent floating through the ephemera and gosh, the quiet moments have been terrifying — I had to fill them any way I could. And now, well I’m looking forward to — ”

On the table, Nick’s phone vibrates.

It’s a picture of the X Factor stage, but shot from out beyond the wings, Liam’s head and the judge’s table just visible over Niall’s shoulder on the monitor. It’s literally like looking at his life from a different angle.

“Harry?” Florence says, sipping from her glass before letting it dangle from her fingers.

Nick nods. “Sorry, what were you saying?”

“Nothing terribly interesting, darling,” she says, “don’t fret. Now, are we splitting a pudding? The panna cotta here is out of this world.”

When he gets in, it’s long gone midnight and he’s half expecting Harry to be there, curled up asleep on the sofa with Pig. There’s no logic to it — Harry doesn’t have a key, what’s he thinking, that Pig let him in? He chucks his stuff onto the coffee table, where it skids into the pile of post Nick’s been
dumping there and inches the candle perilously close to the edge.

He retrieves a glass he abandoned earlier, goes into the kitchen and puts it in the dishwasher, turning it on even though it’s not full just for some noise. He’s pretty sure the house used to just feel like a house, but now, it feels cavernous around him, like one of those stately homes his gran used to drag him to, where his objections would echo off the ceiling until he found some snippet on one of the walls about how the owner collected fossils of frogs to distract him.

He debates a glass of wine but he’s in a weird, wired place — so much so it takes him a moment to realise his phone is buzzing, it’s not the inside of his head. He nips into the lounge and grabs it from the coffee table. It’s a picture of a road sign on the motorway, indicating The North. As Nick watches, the messages keep coming, been storing themselves up for a while, evidently:

How was dinner? And Florence?

We’re leaving now, let you know when I get home :)

Liam says he wants to marry you

U were right about usher

everyone is jumping up and down and he’s cryin

Liam got thru!!!!

everybody’s screaming

It’s 2-1 this Simon guy is a DICK

They’re debating

He nailed it

Nick checks the time. He can’t remember where exactly the sign is but they must be almost there by now. He sends Harry a string of thumbs up emojis and straightens the coffee table, picking up the post to chuck into the recycling.

He’s got his foot on the bin pedal when he spots a gaping hole in the corner of one of the envelopes. It’s about the size a committed dachshund could rip and when he looks closer to see if he actually ate any, through it peeks a distinctive font. Nick peels away the rest of the paper to reveal Slaughter then Regional Argus and a headline about a wind farm, another about new year and new starts, and a special discount on skimmed milk at Niall’s farm shop.

He chucks the envelope away and flicks through the first few pages, smiling a little at bits he wrote about how to exercise when you hate exercise and Harry’s review of the DVD of Skyfall, which details all the ways it’s a ‘hugely enjoyable action spatula’. He sits down with it at the breakfast bar, turns the page, gaze roaming over the ads to the problem page. He stops dead:

Dear Aunty Argus,

I recently had a relationship with someone that didn’t quite go the way I wanted it to.

They were a bit older and from a very different background but we really clicked. Everything was great, actually, until they told me they loved me. I wasn’t expecting it and it felt too soon because we barely knew each other and I always thought ‘I love you’ was supposed to be sort of hard to come
by. I thought it was the sort of thing we’d work towards over a year or so, so I’d have a chance to get used to the idea before I had to deal with the word. It was a shock to just hear it. I didn’t quite believe it, that they might already feel so strongly about somebody like me, and I didn’t say it back, because I wasn’t sure I did and I didn’t want to lie about something so important.

But now they’re gone and I really miss them. Like the way you’d miss someone if you did love them, only because you’d never done it before, you didn’t realise. I’m so scared I’ll never see them again. I don’t know what to do.

H

Nick looks about the kitchen with his heart pounding. He checks the crumpled, chewed envelope for the date stamp. Harry sent it before he came. Recorded delivery. Which Nick signed for. He thought Nick read it. The entire time he was here, he thought Nick read it.

With a wince, Nick scans down to the reply.

Dear H,

It sounds like you’ve made a bit of a mess of it all but you did the right thing. Saying things before you’re sure is a sure-fire way to cause trouble for yourself down the line, although there’s a chance by not saying anything, you made them feel very hurt, because telling someone how you feel is an act of vulnerability as well as bravery.

Maybe you could try and find an address to write to them and explain things? That way you’ve got time to put all your thoughts together and you can be sure of what you want to say. That might make you feel more confident, if saying things is something you struggle with when you need to do it out loud.

Maybe you can tell them your inexperience in these matters made you panic, that you wanted to be sure of yourself because they were so important to you, that you miss them so much, you don’t know what to do with yourself. Maybe you could say other things you’ve wanted to as well, the things you couldn’t find the words for. You could write down all the ways you’d like to be there for them and tell them their smiles were the best part of your day. You could tell them how much their support has meant to you, that you never really had anyone take what’s important to you seriously before. You could explain, maybe, that you didn’t just want to say it because they had, that you wanted your love to stand on its own, and now you think it would if they gave it a chance.

Sometimes writing it down is easier than saying it in person, and if they really do love you, they’ll try and understand.

Good luck working things out. Everyone here at the Argus is rooting for you. Both of you.

Aunty A

Nick stares at the page.

It doesn’t change the more he looks at it, it doesn’t get better or magic into something else just because he wishes it would. The thought of Harry doing that — putting it out there for everyone to see, coming all this way, like some kind of grand gesture. He pictures Harry picturing it. He can’t tell what reception Harry thought he’d get, but it probably wasn’t Nick acting nonchalant and then ignoring everything he’d written.

It’s fine, though, right? They’re fine.
Pig trots in and drops the banana toy Harry bought her at his feet.

“What the —?”

She sits down and stares up at him with the disappointment she usually saves for when he makes her eat the wholegrain turkey food she hates just because it’s good for her.

“Don’t. It’s fine. We’re fine. I’ll just tell him I read it next time he calls. There’s no need to make a song and dance.”

Pig lifts her eyebrows.

“What?” he says.

Nick looks back at the paper. He reads the letter and the reply again.

“Ok, ok. It’s not decades worth of post cards, but it’ll fucking do, won’t it?” he says. “Make yourself useful – help me find my bleedin’ car keys.”
A lot of people don’t read WIPs, so to those of you who did, to those of you who commented on chapters, who sent me asks on tumblr, who supported this basically while it was in progress - this would not have happened without you.

So this chapter? This is for you x

The early breakfast show burbles from the radio. It’s competing with Pig’s snores, which are emitting from the back seat where she’s asleep with the banana Harry gave her and the copy of the Argus under her chin. Nick pulls in to the last service station before he heads off the motorway and follows the snaking path through parked HGVs to a spot right by the doors. The foyer’s deserted, and he checks Pig’s still asleep, then dashes in for a wee.

The lights from Waitrose and KFC are glaring after the rolling darkness of the motorway, make him feel more tired than he did when he was stuck in endless roadworks on the M40 with only his own thoughts and pulsing yellow lights for company. He thinks about getting flowers or a box of chocolates or something, but he doesn’t want to be too full on, so he restricts himself to grabbing a coffee on his way out. He takes a swig, then settles the paper cup in the holder on the dashboard.

“Can you believe we’re doing this?” Nick says.

Pig snorts. He takes it as a no, but what else is there we should be doing at 4am? and checks he’s got the right address plumbed into the sat nav.

The pre-dawn rush hour in Middling Slaughter looks like an old, possibly pissed, guy on a bike who pulls up alongside him at the crossroads in the middle of the sprout field and has an argument with himself about which arm signal means left.

Nick crawls past him, past All Creatures Great and Small, and onto the village, where the pub and the Post Office lie dormant and the Bakery sits with all its lights off. He checks the clock. Harry usually starts around five — he’s got maybe twenty minutes.

He pulls up on the pavement and drains the last of his cold coffee before digging around in the glove box for a mint. He finds a suspiciously ratty packet of Polos, picks the worst of the fluff off, throws the top one away, and shovels a few into his mouth.

Beyond the windshield, it’s just hills and stars and clouds. He’s only been away a month, but the place assaults him with its mix of stark beauty and comfy familiarity. He loves it here; it’s like he’s only just realised. He loves the barren trees, their beckoning fingers waving to the wind, the chunky, blackened yellow stone everything is built from, and the way all the stars drape down like a canopy, nothing to compete with.

He feels like the only person who’s awake, except Dev, chattering away from the speakers about how he hates when mushy peas are too mushy but it’s worse when they’re not mushy enough. Nick
texts him for a shout out and hunkers down in his seat, biting back a laugh at how Dev’s voice is rising, how much anger he’s conjuring about the way pea juice seeps into chips.

“Anyway,” Dev says. “You can catch the rest of my pea soliloquy on Rage Against The Answer Machine later in the week with Gregory. News update for you in a minute but before that, let’s have some Adele, shall we? Oh, and we’re playing this for Mr Nick Grimshaw who’s been driving all night through the wilds of Cheshire — how you been, buddy? You gotta have me over soon to check out your new sofa. Man, it looks intense.”

Nick grins into his scarf. Shout out on Radio 1. Literally never gets old.

The song starts and it’s that one which always used to make him cry. He thought it sounded like a prophecy about how he’d run into an ex, someone he could’ve built an incredible life with, way too late to do so. He used to be able to see himself at a launch or on a dance floor, a twirl of regret around him like disco smoke. Every time he heard it, it was like being visited by the spectre of his future, come to taunt him with the ghost of boyfriends past. It used to feel like inevitability, that sooner or later he’d end up pining for something he could’ve had like a game show contestant who’s supposed to smile through not winning the big prize but can’t quite make their ‘I’ve had a nice day out’ convincing as they clutch their booby prize and go home.

It feels a million miles away. Whatever’s about to happen with Harry, at least it’s not that. He turns the song up.

Compulsively he checks his phone, even though he knows there’s no signal. His last message from Harry arrived hours ago:

Home x

Nick thinks about replying, now, to tell him good morning and get a move on, picturing him stumbling through his bedroom, retrieving clothes from the desk and the floor and the back of the door without any care or attention. He juggles it in his head, Harry’s spreadsheet of futures, and he can see all of them and none of them at once. Hugging in stations blurs into saying goodbye on the doorstep, layers itself over late night phone calls and early morning drives. They’re in the tiny room above the Post Office huddled over a heater, then Nick’s bringing Harry noodles he got in the services as a reward for revising for his retakes, and then they’re in Nick’s garden with the barbecue going and something too loud playing from his phone. He throws some other stuff in: a book launch, his hand on Harry’s back because he can tell he doesn’t feel like he fits there; a studio, where Harry’s watching from the front row, trying to catch Nick’s eye and make him laugh; a wedding they’re attending together, slow dancing to Rihanna, not telling each other they’ve still got confetti in their hair.

If feels like a lot of possible lives to fit together.

He doesn’t blame Harry for panicking, finding it all too much. He remembers all too well what it was like at the beginning of his career, the dwarfing possibility of everything, how he convinced himself that success was the only thing that mattered. And he, well, he only had one thing to really shoot for. He was only ever really good at talking and showing off, cut everything else out of his life so he could focus. Or so he used to think.

If he could go back, he wonders what he’d tell himself. To lay off? To slow down?

He doesn’t think so. He hates the cliché of it, but everything that happened led him here and he wouldn’t want to alter that. But maybe he’d lay an arm around his own shoulder and whisper very gently that life is not a race — or if it is, it’s one with a finish line that’s way, way off. He’d confide,
maybe, that it would be ok to spread himself more evenly between work and life, so he had more practice at the life thing when work shook him loose. He thinks maybe that’s where he veered off with Harry — too much in a hurry to succeed, to tick it off, like it was something to be collected and achieved rather than something he could enjoy being in the middle of.

It’s 5am, and Steve Holden doesn’t include in his headlines the major news that Harry should be here, but the street is still empty. Nick gets out of the car and paces, irrationally thinking that Harry knows he’s here and that’s why he’s not. Pig wags her tail like it’s not arse o’clock, as if he might’ve brought her here for a walk down the stream, through the woods, to the old cottage he’s been calling home. He stamps his feet against the cold, as if he might be able to frighten away the sparkling of the frost, and when that doesn’t work, he jumps up and down on the spot, cursing Harry for nicking his thickest jumper.

Down the road, there’s the murmur of an engine and a moment later, Harry’s ancient Range Rover chugs into view.

Nick can’t look at it. If he’s looking it won’t really be happening. He fixes his gaze on the hill which is supposedly a sleeping dragon. There are clouds over the top of it like a duvet and he knows the noise is Harry’s engine, but still, it sounds like snoring.

He listens as Harry gets closer, imagining him peering over the dashboard and wondering if the car and the man with the dog doing circles of his knees are really who and what he thinks. Does Harry have something on the stereo? What’s the soundtrack for this? Fleetwood Mac or the Rolling Stones, rendered scratchy by a worn out CD?

The engine stops.

The Range Rover’s door creaks open, there’s a crunch of gravel as Harry’s feet hit the pavement and he stumbles closer. Pig tugs on her lead to get to him and Nick finally looks over and says, “What time d’you call this?”

And Harry just grins, like he knows already all the things Nick is going to say to him, all the things he was thinking, like he can feel in it the glittering possibility of everything to come.

“Won’t keep you,” Nick says, like Pig’s not leaping halfway up Harry’s leg. “I know you got cottage loaves to bake and sesame seeds to sprinkle on stuff — but I had something I wanted to say.”

Harry lets Pig mouth at his fingers in greeting, tilting his head. “You couldn’t’ve called?”

“’Tis not the kind of something I wanted to say to you when you’re Skyping me from the gents’, thanks.”

Harry lets out a kind of nervous titter and Nick shoves his hands into his pockets so he doesn’t just waltz away with him down the street, leaving what he came to say trapped like the winner in a golden envelope at an award show. This is it. The thing Nick’s been rehearsing for four hours on motorways and stuck behind a white van and staring at himself in a service station bathroom mirror. He has the same stomach jitters he used to get on X-Factor before the doors opened, only there’s no hiss of dry ice or countdown in his ear telling him this isn’t really real, doesn’t really matter in the grand scheme of things. He feels under rehearsed and over rehearsed at the same time, like as soon as he opens his mouth, he’s going to fluff his lines the exact same way he did in all the versions of this he called cut on.

He looks over Harry’s shoulder at the hill shaped like a dragon. Fleetingly he thinks of this as if he’s telling it as a story on the radio. *Drove all night and then stood there like a right berk for nine entire*
minutes unable to get a flipping word out. Adele was right. It’s a dance floor and peering through the smoke at the life I could’ve had for me. But he’s not on the radio any more, is he.

“So — I read the latest issue of the Argus,” Nick says. “Last night. Or — tonight — couple of hours ago, whatever. Point is, I read it. It’d been on my coffee table since you sent it. Unopened. But I’ve read it, now.”

“Oh,” Harry says.

“Yeah, oh.”

Nick looks at him. He’s close, hair down and shoved haphazardly under a beanie, and he’s still wearing Nick’s jumper. Vanilla and smoke — which will always smell like safety to Nick, now — wafts on the cold around him. And all Nick can think is: you love me. You saw me nearly pass out with anxiety because my dog was throwing up, and have a breakdown on a broken fence because I can’t make mashed potatoes, and after that, you read the worst version of me in the paper and all you could see in it was how to show up on my doorstep with a grand gesture I didn’t see because I’m a hopeless post procrastinator.

He would never have known how to look for this, for someone like Harry. But, well, here he is right in front of him, not demanding anything. Not asking him to change, be less dramatic, less high maintenance, less himself. Not wanting him for anything in particular, just because he’s Nick.

“Must’ve found my behaviour a bit confusing,” Nick says.

Harry cocks his head. “Honestly no more than usual.”

“You cheeky — ” Nick bites down his grin at Harry’s snort of laughter, but he likes it, the way Harry always makes him feel like this, like even when Harry’s making fun of him, it’s easy and gentle and not an attack. “Anyway, I read it,” Nick says, and he finds it easier to be serious than he expected, now he’s doing it. “I read what you wrote. So I know. I know how you feel.”

Harry inches closer, reaching up to cover the place where Nick’s heart is careening about behind his lungs with his palm, like he’s checking Nick’s real.

Nick swallows and covers Harry’s hand with his own. “And you know. You know what’s going in here.” He presses Harry’s hand into his chest as if that’s actually where his feelings live, trapped behind pilled wool with a moth hole in it. “And now, if you want to not talk about it again for a year, that’s fine.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. Because ok.”

Harry looks at him, searching. “Ok?”

“Ok we’ll go back-forward-sideways, whatever direction you want. We’ll go to the cinema and you can stress about meeting my mum — but fair warning, she’ll act like she hates you and leave you guessing about whether it’s the real kind of hatred or you’ve cracked it and been accepted into the family. And if you want to move out, I’ve stayed in some proper grimy dens and had the time of my bleeding’ life, so it’s no skin off my nose if we both end up sleeping on the floor under a broken sink because that’s all you can afford. Or whenever you’re free I’ll come and get you, and you can come to mine — because I really liked having you there and now it feels all weird and too big without you. I can fit in with whatever. Adaptable as fuck, me. And I had a thought about the Argus on the drive — we can do an issue on Liam’s X-Factor journey, and then one on Niall’s booming business, and if
you want an exclusive extract from my book, you’re welcome to it. So there you go. That’s the next three issues sorted — you don’t have to worry about them, so strike ‘em from your list.”

“Nick.”

Harry scrunches up Nick’s jumper, catching chest hair and skin up with it and Nick doesn’t even care. In fact he likes it. It makes this feel real and not like some motorway dashboard fantasy.

“So we’re clear,” Nick says, “I don’t have a fucking clue what we’re going to do with our lives. I don’t know whether you should be a baker or put all your eggs in the basket with the sickly animals or carry on doing both until you collapse with exhaustion. And I don’t know what I’m doing with mine. I don’t know if I’m going to stalk the controller of Radio 2 and beg for a graveyard shift or if I’m going to do an ill-advised stint on Celebrity Big Brother and then leverage my notoriety for a job selling fake diamond jewellery on the shopping channel. I didn’t come here with a plan. I just think it’s really important that we don’t know what we’re doing together.”

Harry takes a sharp breath in.

“What d’you reckon?”

Harry digs his fingers into Nick’s chest. “That sounds — ” He doesn’t make another sound for what feels like ages, and then he nods to steel himself, smiles up, even though his eyes are glassy. “Better. Loads better. Loads better than anything.”

Nick wants to keep talking, do justice to the moment by filling it with words.

He wants to tell Harry he thinks about the thing he said about the dragon and the hillside all the time. He wants him to know that the idea of looking like a hillside — standing still, just existing — but being a dragon kept him going. He wants to tell him: thank god, thank god you were there to say it because I don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t. He wants to explain how much he needed someone to tell him: don’t think you gotta be a dragon just because people expect it. If you want to be a hill, it’s ok to lie down and grow some moss for a bit.

He wants to tell Harry about Florence, about what she said about a life that’s all surface, how he understands what it’s like to float through ephemera, to trudge to gallery openings and parties where you get propositioned by naked rock stars because you’re too frightened of yourself to sit alone at home.

He wants to explain why he doesn’t want that anymore, how his career was the bedrock of his entire life and when it crumbled, it took him with it. He wants Harry to understand that’s how he ended up sitting at a wedding, poking at confetti and necking red wine, unable to see his own life as something he should be the centre of. He wants to explain how crawling out of the rubble of that, fleeing to the middle of nowhere, it wasn’t about hiding. It was about stepping out from all the things he’d hidden behind — the stories and the anecdotes and the persona he created — to see what was there and how having someone who just liked him in all his weird banality saved him, utterly and entirely.

He takes Harry’s hand and kisses his knuckles, pretending the shakes in his fingers are the fault of the cold.

And Harry has things he wants to say too — Nick can tell there are dozens of sentences pressing on the inside of his throat, but right now, they’re just too big and tangled to come out as actual words. He clutches Nick’s fingers and makes a noise which says a lot of things but nothing at all, then abandons that and throws his arms around Nick’s neck.
Staggering to catch him, Nick oofs, pulls him close with the hand that’s not busy holding Pig’s lead and buries his face in Harry’s shoulder. He didn’t intend to be here, didn’t start plotting the course that would lead him to this moment when he was twelve — in fact, getting here took a hundred little disasters and coincidences all slotting together, purposeless until they weren’t. But he’s here. It’s really happening.

He squeezes tight and Harry does too, all of his weight on Nick. A bit of Nick wants to stand here under the stars in the vastness of the moment forever, but he also wants this, with Harry, for Harry, to feel as normal as coming home.

Nick eases back, scuffing his cheek, nods towards the window of the Bakery. “What we making, then?” he says, smiling at the way his own voice cracks.

“I don’t know,” Harry says, and he laughs in that way that sounds like it has tears in it, somewhere just under the surface. “I have no idea.”

“Come on,” Nick says, wrapping an arm around him and murmuring kisses to his temple as he steers him towards the door. “I fancy a Battenberg. Best cake, a Battenberg.”

“You said red velvet was your favourite.”

“Cupcake, favourite cupcake. Battenberg is the best full cake.”

“No,” Harry says, digging the keys out of his pocket. “You can’t just — you can’t just unilaterally decide with no discussion what the best cake is.”

“What you gonna do about it?” Nick says. “Make me make a pie chart?”

Harry snorts and shoves him inside. Their breath makes clouds, cold radiating up off the stone floor and the steel counter, smell of pastry and dough and dried fruit all around them.

“I know it’s not cupcake season,” Nick says, backing himself against the counter while Pig snuffles about underneath it, “but can we make Battenberg cupcakes?”

“That’s not a thing,” Harry says, and punches the ancient light switch, meeting Nick’s eye like he’s being ridiculous, but in that way Harry secretly likes.

“We’ll invent it,” Nick says, reaching for him as the lights flicker a protest at how early it is. “Me and you. Battenberg cupcake. We’ll do a little dragon in marzipan on the top and pretend it’s an ancient local recipe.”

Harry sinks against him. “Then what?” he says.

“They catch on and —”

Nick’s plans for world domination via dragon-topped cupcakes are lost as Harry kisses him against the specials board, hard and deep and probably just to stop him talking.

The lights blink on above them. Nick hasn’t been to bed yet but it feels like the start of a new day. Or a new life, maybe. A new everything.

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When I was little, you know what I wanted more than anything?

I wanted to be friends with famous people and written about in the paper because then I thought I’d have proof people liked me. I wanted a book with my face on on the shelf in WH Smiths, so when my mum and dad saw it, they’d be proud of me. And I wanted to be on the radio, making people laugh and being part of their day in case they didn’t have anyone else to make them smile.

I chipped away and little by little, I got it. I got it all. But I only got the book part by losing the radio — I only got the paper stuff by being written about by people who didn’t like me — I only got the friends by running myself ragged and keeping parts of me to myself. Life doesn’t end up looking like the one you drew yourself a picture of when you were small. The things you think you want, they don’t always manifest the way you think they’re going to. Sometimes getting them hurts. Sometimes wanting things is better than getting them. Sometimes you chase after them anyway knowing both of those things, because you don’t know what else to do.

There’s no moral, here. There’s no grand revelation I came to at 4am pulling off the motorway in search of something different or more.

But if you’re reading this and you’re still young enough to yearn for things — whatever your actual age — I want you to know that the things that you want, they’re worth going after even though they won’t pan out the way you dream they will. They’ll teach you things you didn’t know you needed to learn, about yourself, about love, about everything.

When there’s something you want, especially if it’s something unusual like being a singer or an astronaut or hosting the Radio 1 Breakfast Show, it’s a lonely journey. People in your life might not be there to cheer you on the same way they would if you just wanted to play in goal on the school football team or run half a marathon. Don’t waste your time being angry at them or trying to make them proud. There are people who are rooting for you. You just got to find them.

When in doubt, text in to whoever’s on the radio for a shout out. Tell them about your life and pour out your problems and maybe they’ll play a song for you. It’ll make you feel better. It really really will. And maybe you’ll make someone else feel better by letting them know that you’re out there, just existing, listening to the same stuff they are.

What I didn’t know when I was little — what doing radio taught me — is that there are loads of us, on the radio and listening in, just getting through a day we don’t quite know how to when we get up. Loneliness is a broken mirror. The shards of it are scattered through all kinds of people doing, or not doing, all kinds of things for all sorts of different reasons. And you can either take your shard and stare at yourself in this tiny, sharp fragment that’ll cut you to pieces if you’re not careful or use it to signal to others that you’re there. Use your loneliness to find theirs. And then, though we’re alone, we’re together.

So that’s it. The end of this chapter, the end of this doodle of my surface life.

Enjoy the inevitable ensuing headlines which’ll no doubt erupt from it about me having another breakdown and heading to the country in shame and disgrace.

They won’t be true.

Or they will be, but that’s not how it happened, I promise.

Nick glances at the clock. He’s supposed to be picking Harry up from the station in forty minutes.
They’ve got a whole weekend planned — party for Nick’s book tonight at the reopened Cafe Royal sponsored by Niall’s new ice-cream, Liam’s first X-Factor appearance tomorrow, drive back Sunday for lunch with Anne and Gemma. He looks at the book which alleges to be his life. When he started writing it, he thought he was going to skip through stories and end up with something witty and cutting, insightful, maybe, about people and broadcasting and the construction of fame. But at some point when he wasn’t looking, he landed in a puddle of self-reflection.

He runs his fingers over his embossed name on the cover. He’s said a lot of stuff he didn’t really mean to, but he’s not sure he’d change anything — not that he can now god knows how many copies are winging their way to bookshops and airports and petrol stations all over the country. Reading it back….

Apparently he’s not quite who he thought he was. He had this vision of himself as someone dented by failure into resilience, someone hardened and closed off, but apparently he believes in believing, and magic, and hope. He longs for connections, always has. Been afraid of them, too.

Standing there, in his lounge, with a picture of his own face in his hands, he gets it all at once, like something really obvious he should’ve known ages ago: he couldn’t figure out what to do with his life before because he didn’t have all the pieces yet. But something starts to coalesce.

It’s a whim — one of those whims that’s been circulating through his thoughts like almond milk in tea for the last six months — and he picks up his phone and dials Florence’s number.

“Hello, darling,” she says. “How are you? I saw your advert on the side of a bus this morning — you look ravishing.”

Nick smiles into his screen. “Oh stop it. You still coming tonight?”

“Oh of course,” Florence says. “We wouldn’t miss it.”

“It’s just a quick one, then,” Nick says, tracing his name on the cover again. He taps it twice, decisive. “Between you and me — Joan’s house, how much does she want for it?”

~*~

Nick pulls into his favourite spot in the pick-up only bay, narrowly avoiding squashing a pair of pigeons fighting over a chip.

Everything jangles — the book launch, the idea of it all being out there, seeing Harry, the dedication nestled forever under the cover of his auto bio (for Harry, who I hope won’t find any of this too off-putting) — all of it sharp and metallic and jostling in his stomach.

He takes his phone out and scrolls through the pictures of Joan’s house. The estate agent photos have, if anything, made it look more dilapidated than he remembered it from crawling under the bed for a dusty box of postcards. The bedroom furniture is so dense and wooden it menaces, downstairs the curtains and decor are unforgivably seventies, and the kitchen is a write-off — not to mention the garden, which isn’t really a garden so much as a graveyard for the tools that should’ve been used to hold back the encroachment of the weeds and hedges. It’s one of those places you see on property shows, where some idiot bankrupts themselves turning a house inside out and decides to make one of the walls entirely glass just to make things difficult for everybody. Nick can see it so easily: builders trudging through the mud when everything’s already fourteen months behind schedule, cursing the architect because the fittings don’t fit and the weather has turned and now the bespoke floor has


swelled and needs to be replaced and none of the replacements go with the owner’s tragic sofa that’s way too green for everything.

He always thought they were barking, those people he’d see on *Grand Designs* and *Escape to the Country* traipsing around a collapsing farmhouse talking about potential when all there was in reality was crumbling fireplaces and rotting floors. But apparently he’s one of them, he’s one of those people who thinks anything can be fixed, or at least made bearable, or lived with while it’s still in a bit of a state. He’s had enough practice, he supposes, with himself.

If he buys it, this place, god knows how long it’ll take him to sort it all out. He smiles at the thought. It’s perfect, not least because the person he’d like to take to the *Sold* sign for a dramatic reveal will need a little time to get there. Nick knows there’s no guarantee he’ll be up for it. Harry’s been very busy making unsurprisingly popular videos about breaking your dachshund’s paper addiction; he could well be YouTube’s first celebrity vet slash baker by the time Nick’s finished the paperwork. But in the same way Nick once looked into a Portacabin window and was able to see himself on the Radio 1 Breakfast Show, as he looks at the photos, he can sort of see himself standing there and saying, “So what do you think about an extension for the kitchen with a needless wall of glass so you can watch the sun rise while you make us croissants at the weekend?”

It probably won’t look quite the way he’s picturing the fragments of it now. He wants it, though, whatever version life will take him towards and the future no longer feels like forbidden territory.

The steady stream of people coming out of the exit turns into a torrent of commuters, schoolkids and tourists. At the tail end of it, Nick spots a familiar mop of hair. He’s got his battered overnight bag on his shoulder and Basil’s tucked under his elbow, and he waves when he sees Nick waiting for him. Pig’s noticed them too, tail thumping against the leather and her breath fogging up the glass in greeting.

Harry grins at them through the passenger window. No matter how late his night’s been or how early his morning, his first smile always has a shimmer of the one he gave Nick outside the Bakery in it, like every moment since then has had that one hidden deep inside it, barely, but still, perceptible.

Nick chucks the copy of his book onto the back seat and as he leans across to open the door for Harry, he can’t help but think it:

*There you are, my love, my sequel.*

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