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I

Where does a story start?

It's a lie, the first page of a book, because it masquerades as a beginning. A *real* beginning – the opening of something – when what you're being offered is an arbitrary line in the sand. *This story starts here.* Pick a random event. Ignore whatever came before it or catch up later. Pretend the world stops when the book closes, or that a resolution isn't simply another random moment on a curated timeline.

But life isn't like that, so books are dishonest.

Maybe that's why humans like them.

And it's saying that kind of shit that gets me thrown out of the Fentiman Road Book Club.

Here are some other things I've been asked not to return to:

- The Blenheim Road Readers Group
- A large flat-share I briefly attempted in Walthamstow
- My last relationship
- My current job

The final two have been in quick succession. This morning, Will – my boyfriend of four months – kissed me, listed my virtues out of nowhere and concluded the pep talk by ending our relationship.

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The job situation I found out about eighty seconds ago. According to the flexing jaw and flared nostrils of my boss, I've yet to respond to this new information. He seems faint and muted, as if he's behind a pane of thick frosted glass. He also has a dried oat on his shirt collar but now doesn't seem the right time to point it out: he's married, his wife can do it later.

'Cassie,' he says more loudly. 'Did you hear me?'

Obviously I heard him or I'd still be giving a detailed report on the client meeting I just had, which is exactly what I was doing when he fired me.

'The issue isn't so much your work performance,' he ploughs on gallantly. 'Although Christ knows, somebody who hates phone calls as much as you do shouldn't be working in public relations.'

I nod: that's an accurate assessment.

'It's your *general demeanour* I can't have in this office. You are rude. Insubordinate. Arrogant, frankly. You are not a team player, and do you know what this office needs?'

'A better coffee machine.'

'That's exactly the kind of bullshit I'm talking about.'

I'd tell you my boss's name and give him a brief description, but judging by this conversation he isn't going to be a prominent character for much longer.

'I've spoken to you about this on multiple occasions – Cassandra, look at me when I'm talking to you. Our highest-paying client just dropped us because of your quote, unquote *relentlessly grating behaviour*. You are unlikeable. That's the exact word they used. *Unlikeable*. Public relations is a People Job. For People People.'

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Now, just hang on a minute.

'I'm a person,' I object, lifting my chin and doing my best to stare directly into his pupils. 'And as far as I'm aware, being *likeable* is irrelevant to my job description. It's certainly not in my contract, because I've checked.'

My boss's nostrils flare into horsiness.

I rarely understand what another human is thinking, but I frequently feel it: a wave of emotion that pours out of them into me, like a teapot into a cup. While it fills me up, I have to work out what the hell it is, where it came from and what I'm supposed to do to stop it spilling everywhere.

Rage that doesn't feel like mine pulses through me: dark purple and red.

His colours are an invasion and I do not like it.

'Look,' my boss concludes with a patient sigh that is nothing like the emotion bolting out of him. 'This just isn't working out, Cassie, and on some level you must already know that. Maybe you should find something that is better suited to your . . . specific skill set.'

That's essentially what Will told me this morning too. I don't know why they're both under the impression I must have seen the end coming when I very much did not.

'Your job has the word *relations* in it,' my boss clarifies helpfully. 'Perhaps you could find one that doesn't?'

Standing up, I clear my throat and look at my watch: it's not even Wednesday lunchtime yet.

Relationship: over.

Job: over.

'Well,' I say calmly. 'Fuck.'

So that's where my story starts.

It could have started anywhere: I just had to pick a moment. It could have been waking up this morning to the sound of my flatmates screaming at each other, or eating my breakfast (porridge and banana, always), or making an elaborate gift for my first anniversary with Will (slightly pre-emptive).

It could have been the moment just before I met him, which would have been a more positive beginning. It could have been the day my parents died in a car accident, which would have been considerably less so.

But I chose here: kind of in the middle.

Thirty-one years into *my* story and a long time after the dramatic end of some others. Packing a cardboard box with very little, because it transpires the only thing on my desk that doesn't belong to the agency is a gifted coffee mug with a picture of a cartoon deer on it. I put it in the box anyway. There's no real way of knowing what's going to happen next, but I assume there will still be caffeine.

'Oh shit!' My colleague Sophie leans across our desks as I stick a wilting plant under my arm just to look like I'm not leaving another year of my life behind with literally nothing to show for it. 'They haven't *fired* you? That's *awful*. I'm sure we will all miss you *so much*.'

I genuinely have no idea if she means this or not. If she does, it's certainly unexpected: we've been sitting opposite each other since I got here and all I really know about her is that she's twenty-two years old and likes tuna sandwiches, typing aggressively and picking her nose as if none of us have peripheral vision.

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‘Will you?’ I ask, genuinely curious. ‘Why?’

Sophie opens her mouth, shuts it again and goes back to smashing her keyboard as if she’s playing whack-a-mole with her fingertips.

‘Cassandra!’ My boss appears in the doorway just as I start cleaning down my keyboard with one of my little anti-septic wipes. ‘What the hell are you doing? I didn’t mean leave *right now*. Jesus on a yellow bicycle, what is wrong with you? I’d prefer you to work out your notice period, please.’

‘Oh.’ I look down at the box and my plant. I’ve packed now. ‘No, thank you.’

Finished with cleaning, I sling my handbag over my shoulder and my coat over my arm, hold the box against my stomach, awkwardly hook the plant in the crook of my elbow and try to get the agency door open on my own. Then I hold it open with my knee while I look back, even though – much like Orpheus at the border of the Underworld – I know I shouldn’t.

The office has never been this quiet.

Heads are conscientiously turned away from me, as if I’m a sudden bright light. There’s a light patter of keyboards like pigeons walking on a roof (punctuated by the violent death stabs of Sophie), the radiator by the window is gurgling, the reception is blindingly gold-leafed and the water cooler drips. If I’m looking for something good to come out of today – and I think I probably should – it’s that I won’t have to hear *that* every second for the rest of my working life.

It’s a productivity triumph. They should fire people for fundamental personality flaws more often.

The door slams behind me and I jump even though I’m the one who slammed it. Then my phone beeps, so I balance

everything precariously on one knee and fumble for it. I try to avoid having unread notifications if I can. They make my bag feel heavy.

Dankworth please clean your shit up.

I frown as I reply:

Which shit in particular?

There's another beep.

Very funny. Keep the kitchen clear.

It is a COMMUNAL SPACE.

It wasn't funny a couple of weeks ago when I came down for a glass of water in the middle of the night and found Sal and Derek having sex against the fridge.

Although perhaps that is the *definition* of communal.

Still frowning, I hit the button for the lift and mentally scour the flat for what I've done wrong this time. I forgot to wash my porridge bowl and spoon. There's also my favourite yellow scarf on the floor and a purple jumper over the arm of the sofa. This is my sixth flat-share in ten years and I'm starting to feel like a snail: carrying my belongings around with me so I leave no visible trace.

I send back:

OK.

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My intestines are rapidly liquidising, my cheeks are hot and a bright pink rash I can't see is forming across my chest. Dull pain wraps itself around my neck, like a scarf pulled tight.

It's fascinating how emotions can tie your life together.

One minute you're twelve, standing in the middle of a playground while people fight over who doesn't get you as a teammate. The next you're in your thirties, single and standing by the lifts of an office you've just been fired from because nobody wants you as a teammate. Same sensations, different body. Literally: my cells have cunningly replaced themselves at least twice in the interim.

The office door swings open. 'Cassandra?'

Ronald has worn the same thing – a navy cashmere jumper – every day since he started working here a few months ago. It smells really lovely, so I'm guessing there must be plural.

He walks towards me and I immediately panic. Now and then I've caught him looking at me from the neighbouring desk with an incalculable expression on his face, and I have no idea what it could be. Lust? Repulsion? I've been scripting a response to the former for a month now, just in case.

I am honoured by your romantic and/or sexual interest in me given that we've only exchanged perfunctory greetings, but I have a long-term boyfriend I am almost definitely in the process of falling in love with.

Well, that excuse isn't going to work any more, is it.

Ronald clears his throat and runs a large hand over his buzz cut Afro. 'That's mine.'

'Who?' I blink, disorientated by the grammar. 'Me?'

'The plant.' He points at the shrubbery now clutched under my sweaty armpit. 'It's mine and I'd like to keep it.'

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Ah, the sweet, giddy flush of humiliation is now complete. 'Of course,' I say stiffly. 'Sorry, Ronald.'

Ronald blinks and reaches out a hand; I move quickly away so his fingers won't touch mine, nearly dropping the pot in the process. It's the same fun little dance I do when I have to pay with cash at the supermarket checkout, which is why I always carry cards.

I get into the lift and press the button. Ronald now appears to be casually assessing me as if I'm a half-ripe avocado, so I stare at the floor until he reaches a conclusion.

'Bye,' he says finally.

'Bye,' I say as the lift doors slide shut.

And that's how my story starts.

With a novelty mug in a box, a full character assassination and the realisation that when I leave a building I am missed considerably less than a half-dead rubber plant.

It's not all bad.

At least tomorrow I won't be sitting in a loud office with a reception that looks like it's been licked by King Midas, listening to people who don't like me eat crisps, desperately hoping nobody calls for an Idea Hurricane, and pretending all the lies I'm being paid to tell don't make me want to rip my skin off with my fingernails.

Tomorrow will be a *good* day.

Obviously, the day after that I'll be sitting in my bank manager's office, breathing into a paper bag and begging him to extend my overdraft, so I should probably make the most of it.

'Cassandra?'

The lift doors slide open with a *ping* and I charge towards the exit, holding my cardboard box defensively out in front of me like some kind of Trojan shield.

'Miss Dankworth?' Credit to the receptionist: she isn't easily ignored. 'Hang on a second – I've got Mr Fawcett on line nine, and he says it's company policy to make sure you hand in your pass before you leave.'

Cassandra Penelope Dankworth: that's my name. Thanks to my (dead) parents, I sound like a cross between a Greek heroine and a killer's basement.

'Can't stop,' I manage. 'In flight mode.'

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My heart is racing, my veins and pupils are dilating, my lungs are expanding and oxygen is racing to my brain in preparation for what it now assumes is imminent physical danger. Which is super handy if you need to run away from a rampaging woolly mammoth and not so handy if you're just trying to get out of an office block in central London without vomiting on your trainers.

Panicked, I body-slam the front door repeatedly until the receptionist takes pity on me and lets me out with a *click*.

Fresh air hits me in the face like a bright wall.

Eyes shut, I stand on the street for a few seconds and attempt to recalibrate. The insides of my eyelids are flickering – tiny warning flares sent up by dozens of sinking ships – and if I don't find a way to calm down immediately *it* is going to happen and nobody wants that: not here, not on a public pavement, not in central Soho surrounded by people eating eight-pound crayfish baguettes.

This is why Will keeps telling me to start yoga. But I just don't feel comfortable with that many simultaneous bottoms in the air.

'Excuse me.' A woman in a viciously orange bomber jacket taps me lightly on the shoulder and I jump as if she just stabbed me with a cattle prod. 'You're kind of blocking the entrance to the— Are you OK?'

I blink at her. 'Banana muffin.'

'I'm sorry?'

A giddy wave of relief. 'I need a banana muffin.'

With my cardboard box gripped tightly, I begin urgently scurrying towards the tiny café on the corner. Banana muffins are comforting. Banana muffins are reassuring and

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familiar. Banana muffins don't wake up in the morning and tell you they care about you immensely but just don't see a future with you any more.

The blue café doorbell tinkles behind me and it makes me briefly think of *It's a Wonderful Life*, which is a beautiful film about a much-loved man who has a positive impact on the world around him and which I, therefore, find difficult to relate to.

'Hello, young lady! Goodness, is it one o' clock already? Or are you early?'

I stare at the place where banana muffins should be.

'Oh!' The café owner smiles as if the whole world isn't now disintegrating beneath my feet. 'I'm afraid we had a delivery issue this morning and they didn't have the banana ones you like so much, but we *do* have some delicious chocolate muffins and a lovely salted caramel which I can personally attest is—'

'Banana,' I insist, abruptly welling up.

'Not today,' he clarifies gently. 'Come in at your normal time tomorrow and I'll make sure I put a big one aside for you, OK?'

'But' – my grief feels overwhelming – 'I won't be here tomorrow.'

'Then why don't you take a seat for a minute and I'll see if I can find you something else instead?'

The old man points with concern at the green velvet chairs and a vivid memory flashes: Will, drinking a cappuccino and grinning at me with the sharpened mouth of a cat, lined with chocolate.

'Don't cry, sweetheart,' the café man adds in alarm. 'How

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about I put some banana muffins aside tomorrow so you can take extras home and freeze them?’

I’m never going to see Will again, am I.

That’s the rule, right? They tell you they’ll stay in touch, that you’ll always be part of each other’s lives, except it’s just a script – a lie you’re supposed to see through – but you believe them until they slowly stop answering your text messages and cat GIFs and one day you see them in Pizza Express with someone else and they pretend they can’t see you even though you’re waving as hard as you can.

I just didn’t think it would happen with Will. Everything was going so well. I didn’t get a chance to construct a suitable exit strategy from our relationship or plan a response to being dumped or properly rehearse how my heartbreak might feel in my head first.

I wasn’t *prepared*.

‘Hey,’ a woman in a big grey hat says as I stumble back out of the café door. ‘Wait just a—’

Everything is too far away and too close at the same time, too loud and also too quiet; a yellow door, an orange can, a blue sliver of sky, a dropped navy glove, the red ring around a street sign; a kaleidoscope turning.

A pigeon flaps violently and I put my hands over my face.

It’s coming.

It’s coming and without my banana muffin there is nothing I can do to stop it.

I need to get home *now*.

Struggling to breathe, I stagger round the corner into a sudden blast of noise so raw and so painful it takes a moment to establish that it’s not coming from inside me.

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'Fur's not fair! Fur's not fair! Fur's not fair!'

'Fashion has no compassion!' A woman with a purple bowl cut thrusts a leaflet at me. 'A hundred million animals every year are raised and killed for their fur! They spend their lives in tiny cages before being viciously slaughtered so that humans can wear their skins!'

Blue-tinged magenta; cheese and onion breath. A surge of hot electricity careers from one side of my head to the other. Cringing, I'm pushed into the sticky, bare flesh of a topless man.

'Minks are semi-aquatic animals!' he shouts as I stare at his nipples. 'They are biologically designed to hold their breath and so suffer horribly during the gassing process!'

'I—' I manage, tripping over a banner, and now I'm being swept down Regent Street like a paralysed dolphin caught in a shoal of hundreds of bright, screaming, woolly-hatted fish with megaphones and whistles.

'FUR IS DEATH!'

'Fur is death!'

'FUR IS DEATH!'

Drums bang, purple smoke explodes; a car horn blasts, a child starts screaming and a dog barks. A sheet of pure sound passes through me and I start to pull apart on a cellular level, the way a glass shakes just before it shatters.

'Head-to-toe electrocution!' An old lady gets right in my face: pores like orange coral, emotions neon yellow. 'Foxes get an electrode up their butts. Does that sound fun to you?'

I follow the direction of her eyes to the large furry tail clipped to the front of my handbag. Will teases me for being 'such a child sometimes', but I like to hold on to it tightly

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when I'm on a busy train or someone gets too close to me in the Post Office queue. It's also clearly artificial: it's bright bloody *green*.

Which is what I open my mouth to politely explain when a spray of sticky liquid hits my face. It smells sour; tastes like ink and rotting Jelly Babies.

When I put my hand up, it comes away red.

Somebody starts wailing loudly.

And it's only as I start desperately clawing and elbowing my way out of the crowd that I realise the horrible monotone noise is coming out of me.

It's here.

It's here and I'm covered in (Blood? Paint? Corn syrup?) and fireworks are exploding behind my eyelids and I'm *unlikeable* and *relentlessly grating* and unemployed again and a siren goes off and a shop alarm shoots through my head and Will doesn't love me, couldn't love me, maybe there's nothing to love and there are *no fucking banana muffins anywhere*.

Openly sobbing now, I take the only option I have left. I find the nearest empty doorway, crouch in a small ball on the ground with my arms wrapped tightly around my head.

(‘Cassandra must stop reacting to stress like a hedgehog.’)

And I wait for everything to go black.

3

It's odd behaviour, I know.

People have been telling me how weird I am since I was a small child, with varying degrees of anger and irritation. Over the years my 'little episodes' have been put down to:

- Victorian-esque hysteria ('Get her some smelling salts')
- A dramatic disposition
- A desperate need for attention
- A pathological inclination towards ruining parties

All I know for sure is that as long as I can get somewhere dark and silent as soon as I feel one coming on, my 'hissy fits' often recede just before peaking, like a sneeze or an orgasm.

And if I don't . . .

Let's just say a large proportion of my life is spent in constant fear that the next one will happen in a client meeting, in the middle of Zara on a Saturday afternoon or at somebody else's wedding. ('Cassandra must stop making everything about her.') My theory is that my brain is like a lazy IT department, and every time there's a problem with the electrics it just panics and pulls the plug out at the wall.

Switch her off, switch her back on again: see if that helps.

This must have been a particularly bad one; by the time I

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finally resurface, my limbs are covered in scratch marks, my body feels swollen – a balloon filled with water – and the street is dark and back to normal. The protest has gone.

Shivering, I look more closely at my wrist: so has my watch.

I look around: plus my box with my mug in it.

Nice one. Thanks, London.

Aching all over, I groggily attempt to rise like Aphrodite, except that instead of the Greek goddess of love and beauty I'm obviously a snot-covered, unemployed woman in her early thirties, and instead of gracefully emerging from a seashell I'm hanging sweatily on to the doorknob of a new establishment called Bar Humbug, attempting not to make eye contact with a judgemental binman.

On the upside, I feel infinitely calmer now.

You can say what you like about my brain – and a lot of people have done over the decades – but it certainly knows how to return to factory settings.

‘HELLO? WHO IS IT?’

I wish my flatmates would stop yelling this every time I open the front door: I'm the only other person who lives here.

‘Cassandra,’ I say, locking it behind me.

After careful consideration, I splurged on an Uber back to my flat in Brixton instead of attempting to navigate public transport as I normally would. Now may not be the time to start splashing cash around, but it's also not the time to be half a kilometre underground with a brain that feels like over-milked mashed potato.

‘Oh.’ Sal appears in the kitchen doorway wearing a pair

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of bright pink cropped shorts and casually props one foot on the other toned leg like a ridiculously beautiful flamingo. 'It's you.'

'WHO?' Derek shouts again from the living room.

'Cassandra,' Sal calls back with a deliberate note of disappointment, eyeing me suspiciously as if I've just broken in. 'We're waiting for the takeaway guy.'

'Do they have a key now too, then?' I put my bag down and take my trainers off.

'Ha. Always so unbearably witty.'

Salini Malhotra is a smidge shorter than me – 'tall for a girl' (generally only an observation made by short men) – and has glowing skin, full lips and the kind of cheekbones I can only assume were carved by Zeus himself. Derek Miller is her boyfriend and similarly attractive, if you like men who leave used teeth-whitening strips and blond beard shavings all over the bathroom, which I do not.

I've lived here for about six months now, and my flatmate is still scanning my features as if she's going to be asked to draw them at some point in the future.

'Oh!' I say, suddenly remembering the fake blood from the protest and realising I must look like I've been casually caught in a meat grinder and forgotten to mention it. 'I'm not hurt, don't worry.'

'I'm not going to,' Sal sighs tiredly, unhooking her leg and turning to forage in one of the cupboards for a glass. 'You seem fully capable of looking after yourself, Cassandra.'

I watch her for a few seconds. The colour coming out of her isn't quite anger, but it's definitely in the same family: a blue-red, like the shade of an expensive designer lipstick

I've been told I can't wear because it clashes with my hair. I can feel the intensity of her emotion tickling the edges of my skin, trying to get in. Not quite anger, more than resentment, too bright to be disgust . . .

'Derek,' she calls to the living room. 'Your *other* girlfriend is here. Aren't you going to come and say hello?'

Whatever it is, Sal clearly hasn't forgiven me yet. There are also a few splashes of vomit yellow shooting out of her, but that makes no sense and I'm tired so I must be reading it wrong.

'Be nice, babe,' Derek admonishes, ambling into the room with the blank smile of a toothpaste model and staring at her bottom. 'She screwed up. We all do it sometimes. Try to let it go while we're all living under the same roof, yeah?'

Then he slowly wraps a long arm around her and pulls her towards him for a kiss in a gesture that reminds me a lot of an elephant eating a peanut.

'Fine,' Sal sniffs, watching me warily over his shoulder as if I'm a gas canister placed next to an open flame and should be monitored at all times in case I take the whole house down. 'Sorry. I just think it might be easier for all of us if we had the place to ourselves again. It's not really big enough for three people. Plus, she's in her thirties. Surely she wants a place of her own by now?'

As if I'm sitting on a deposit for a beautiful flat in Primrose Hill but have instead decided to take their tiny box room in Brixton for the sheer pleasure of watching them grope each other by the teabags.

'You're both twenty-nine,' I point out shortly.

'Everyone knows thirty is the cut-off point before

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flat-sharing with someone you're not screwing is just a bit sad.' Sal peels herself away from Derek and narrows dark brown eyes in my direction as if trying to find somewhere to put me, like an awkwardly shaped piece of Tupperware. 'Why don't you just move in with the lawyer you're dating? Get out of this little *rut* you're clearly in.'

My stomach contracts as if whacked by a netball: a sensation I haven't felt for quite some time but which is carved deeply into my muscle memory.

On the contrary, I am currently rut-less.

'Will isn't a lawyer,' I say. 'He's a wildlife cameraman.'

I'm about to triumphantly add that he's not dating me any more, actually, before realising this might not be the slam dunk I'm looking for.

'Just leave it now,' Derek says firmly, bopping Sal affectionately on the nose. 'I mean it. We said we'd give Cassie as much time as she needs to find somewhere else to live, and we're going to do that. We're not dicks.'

'I'm looking,' I say. 'Really.'

By 'looking' I mean: opening Gumtree twice, examining the kind of studios I can afford, deciding that the devil I know at least has hot water on tap and no shower cubicle literally touching my bed, and firmly closing my laptop again. Maybe if I hide in my room long enough, they'll forget all the drama of a few months ago and we can go back to normal.

With 'normal' being us having absolutely nothing in common and some passive-aggressive comments about my sartorial choices.

It still beats whatever the hell *this* is.

'I'll look harder,' I mumble, looking around the kitchen

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with a frown. Something feels wrong. It smells . . . different. They got fish and chips last night, and normally the smell of beer-battered death festers for days, but it's already gone. The yellow scarf is hanging back on its hook, and when I turn towards the sofa my purple jumper has disappeared.

Shit. In all the fun of today, I forgot about the texts.

'I apologise for leaving my porridge out,' I offer formally, turning towards the sink. 'I'll wash it up now.'

Except that's gone too.

'Did we get a cleaner?' My hedgehog bowl is neatly positioned back in my minuscule cupboard (the only kitchen space they offered me and which I have to organise daily like a game of Tetris to stop it all falling out). 'Because I'm not sure I can . . . chip in towards that just now.'

'What?' Sal turns on the television loudly.

'Never mind,' I sigh. I'd tell you what I did to destroy yet another cohabiting situation but I've already lived through the humiliation once. All you need to know is it was a misunderstanding, not one of my prouder moments and I don't really blame Sal for treating me like novelty wallpaper that seemed like a good idea at the time but is now proving inordinately difficult to get rid of.

'Oh!' she yells as I head up the stairs to my tiny bedroom. 'You got another bloody letter, Cassandra! I put it outside your door again, but can you do your own admin going forwards, please? I am not your personal bloody secretary.'

Blinking, I pick up the envelope leaning against my door like a drunk middle-aged man at a bar. The handwriting is so familiar – *Cass* – and a queasy sensation ripples through me; I close my eyes briefly until it's gone.

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I got a letter yesterday too. This is getting really out of hand.

Ripping it in half, I open the door and throw it in my wastepaper basket again: I've no intention of reading or answering this one either. Then I close the door quietly, flop backwards on my small double bed and stare blankly at the ceiling. It *is* a nice little room and I don't want to leave just yet if I can possibly avoid it. Yes, it was originally a bathroom and it's so small I have to hang my large collection of clothes on open racks and shelves next to a remaining chipped sink, which is visually distressing even if I organise them all by colour and texture (which I obviously do).

But it's also clean, cheap and perfectly symmetrical, which is a rare combination in London. It has no apparent mould or bloodstains and does have a real window, which is an improvement on five of the eight other places I looked at. The sun comes in just before work in the morning, and – if you fall asleep at a specific angle – sometimes you wake up with a warm, happy yellow stripe of it lining your eyelids.

Very occasionally, that exact spot also happens to coincide with Will's bare chest, which means if I position myself carefully I get to wake up to the sound of his heartbeat too.

Got to, past tense, no longer relevant.

Fuck.

Grabbing my phone, I smash out a text before pride or self-respect can stop me:

Are we absolutely sure we've

made the right decision?

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I quite like the dignified way I've shifted to plural pronouns, thereby implying we had equal input into the situation when we absolutely did not.

Then I press SEND, hold my breath and try not to count.
Forty-eight seconds later:

Yeah! It's going to be great.

You'll see!

I blink at my screen.

Uh.

'Great' is not the word I'd use, Will.

Another beep.

You and your thesaurus brain. ;)

Prodigious. Stupendous. Life-changing.

Best decision ever. Better?

Not really, no. People ask what's 'wrong' with me all the time, but now and then I wonder if I'm actually the problem. That is the most inappropriate winky face I have ever seen.

Jaw gritted, I write back:

Glad you're happy.

Then I throw my phone to the end of my bed.

Four months.

I spent four months of my life with a man who is now

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apparently celebrating the end of our relationship as if it's the World Cup final. And I should have seen it coming: that's what's so embarrassing. Will is a handsome, thirty-four-year-old man with a serious, nearly-got-married relationship under his belt; I'm still collecting our used cinema tickets and keeping count of exactly how many dates we've been on. Last night was number twenty-six, which I still think deserves a *little* more respect when over than 'best decision ever', thank you very much.

To clarify, I'm not *always* the one being dumped.

You might think that's the case, but out of twenty-three temporary partners I'd say it's about fifty-five to sixty per cent me doing the dumping. Dating and relationships are super exhausting, even if the other person really wants to be in it. Which, as he has just made extremely clear, Will absolutely does not.

Suddenly drowsy, I climb under the duvet and pull it over my head so it forms a little private fort. My blonde hair crackles with static, puffs out like dandelion seeds and then immediately sticks to my face. Brushing it away, I yawn and close my eyes. This always happens. Too much emotion in one go and my brain experiences a power surge and sends me to sleep to preserve battery. Inconvenient when you're at, say, your parents' funeral, but not so bad when you're already in bed and you don't have that much left to stay awake for.

I'm nearly unconscious again when the doorbell rings.

Behind my eyelids, a bright flash of neon blue.

'For the love of— CASSANDRA! IT'S FOR YOU. Where the bloody hell is this takeaway? Are they catching it themselves? I am sodding emancipated.'

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Confused – I’m still too sleepy to work out if Sal means *emaciated* or if her father has stopped paying the mortgage – I droop out of bed and pull on my old, bright yellow dressing gown over the top of my work clothes. It’s been a long day and everything hurts. I need all the extra fluff I can get.

Pulling the hood up and hearing my hair crackle again, I step into the hallway.

‘Hey, chick,’ Will grins.

4

Well, this is unexpected.

‘Get it?’ Will adds after six long seconds of me staring silently at him. ‘Because you’re all fluffy like a baby chicken? And also you’re a woman, so it’s a playful nod towards an outdated and misogynist terminology I would never use in earnest?’

I open my mouth.

Admittedly, I’ve never had a real long-term relationship before – at four months, Will is my Personal Best – but is it standard practice to turn up at your ex’s house on the evening you dumped them and comment on their loungewear?

‘Did work run late?’ Will glances at the time on his phone. ‘Are you dressed underneath, Cass? Because we need to leave now if we want to make it.’

In shock, I peel open my yellow dressing gown to reveal a dark navy jumpsuit like the world’s least sexy poultry-themed stripper. Another bolt of confusion: Wednesday’s work jumpsuit is black. I must have been so upset by our break-up this morning I went ahead and donned the wrong one.

‘You look perfect,’ Will grins. ‘Grab your trainers.’

And I know at this point I should probably ask a few pertinent questions – any questions at all would be good – but

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Will just said I look perfect, which is nice to hear, so I nod and obediently grab my trainers.

Maybe he's here for a debrief.

Maybe this is what happens after twenty-six dates: you don't just end a relationship one morning with a kiss and a series of compliments and then never speak again. You come back later for a formal termination meeting so you can discuss it all in-depth, break it down into bullet points and make a list of exactly where it all went wrong. Because I have to be honest: I thought about it all morning and I have no bloody idea.

'Hi.' Will smiles as I step out of the front door, leaning forwards and gently pecking my cheek.

I stare at him. 'Hi.'

That feels inappropriate too: surely he gave up the right to casually put his lips on me this morning? A familiar whiff of too-strong black coffee – I miss him already and he's literally touching me – and Will strides down the path with me following, still staring. His walk was one of the first things I noticed when we met. It's both intrepid and jaunty, like Odysseus in charge of his ship. There's something generally solid and dauntless about Will – he's an oak tree of a man – and that's a *very* attractive quality for someone who feels flimsy and daunted ninety per cent of the time.

What the hell is going on? In fairness, I didn't check my emails at all today: maybe the missing contextual information I need is sitting in my inbox.

I'm also desperately trying to identify any colours or emotions, but there's nothing there. Whatever Will is feeling, it's either not very strong or he's hiding it from me. He's very, very

good at that. It's one of the reasons our break-up came out of nowhere. I didn't see anything at all until the last minute.

'Remind me where we're going?' I ask.

A tiny burst of hope: maybe he's *not* here for an End of Relationship Interview after all. Maybe he's here for Constructive Feedback we can dissect, process and work on together. Maybe I can convince him to re-contract despite his doubts about me, like a desperate mobile-phone salesperson.

Will lifts his eyebrows. 'If It Ain't Baroque.'

'What?' I abruptly stop walking. '*Why?*'

'Because it's an excellent pun, Cassandra. And a unique culinary experience. It's a three-minute walk away and I'm starving. Also, I booked it weeks ago. It's in the diary.'

Will constantly travels the world for work, so what we lack in employment-life synergy, we make up for with very clearly outlined weekly schedules and emailed itineraries I send him every Sunday evening.

'OK, it's just . . .' I frown. 'Never mind.'

It just seems a little cruel, that's all. Will is normally so thoughtful and sensitive . . . *Unless* this is all part of a plan? A romantic gesture, designed to smooth things over so we can seamlessly recommence date twenty-seven?

And frankly, I can't wait that long.

I'm not going to sit down in an eighteenth-century-themed pop-up restaurant and pretend to read a menu I already know by heart and fake-smile at a waitress with lipstick on her lace collar just to find out if I'm single or not.

'Will,' I say, grabbing for his hand and awkwardly clutching his fingertips instead. 'About this morning—'

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‘Shit.’ One colour flickers, but it’s too faint and too fast for me to tell what it is. ‘I totally forgot about that. I was just stressed, waiting for my next assignment to come through. Work’s been a bit thin on the ground recently. I’m so sorry, Cass. I can be such a grumpy asshole.’

And there it is: everything I’ve ever wanted since approximately ten past eight this morning.

My joy feels visceral, like an egg breaking.

It wasn’t a *break-up*, it was a misunderstanding – conflicting views, a normal part of a healthy relationship! – and I massively overreacted. (‘Cassandra has an unpleasant tendency to catastrophise.’) The fact that I still don’t understand what happened seems largely irrelevant as long as it’s fixed.

‘Don’t apologise,’ I beam, squeezing his hand. ‘I’m sure it was my fault too, whatever it was. I’m sorry. It’s forgotten. Never to be mentioned again.’

Overwhelmed with happiness, I’m unsure what comes next. On one level, this is an epic romantic reunion that requires unbridled passion, and on another, we’re standing in the middle of the road being beeped at by a white van. I lean up to kiss Will on the lips. He jerks his head towards me like a turkey, then tugs me across the road.

‘Let’s not get run over this evening, hey?’ His voice is buoyant but stiff at the same time, like a floating log. ‘I really want the Chicken Fricassee with Goosed-berries and Giblets, which is another reason I’m glad you took off that yellow fluff. I’d have felt like I was sitting opposite an ingredient.’

Brixton at night is busy and loud, but there’s an appealing Dionysian quality to it. A richness to the colours, a thickness to the air. It’s raw meat and incense and chiffon and bin juice

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and purple and cinnamon and lamb and cigarettes, which often suffocates me, but tonight – feeling like this, holding Will’s hand – it’s warm and enveloping, like marinating in something delicious.

‘Again?’ I carefully adjust our entwined fingers so mine are on top. ‘Wasn’t it gross enough the first time? Just how good are inner organs, anyway?’

We stand behind another couple outside the refitted metal cargo container as a girl wearing a long red velvet skirt from Whistles and a brocade apron ticks off names on a clipboard. (I recognise the skirt from the Christmas season three years ago.)

‘No idea,’ Will says. ‘Never had it.’

‘Welcome to If It Ain’t Baroque!’ The girl smiles at us with red lipstick and she’s wearing the same shirt as yesterday too: there’s a tiny smudge of pale pink lipstick on the elaborate collar. What else isn’t she keeping clean? ‘We hope to give you an unforgettable comestible experience tonight. Name?’

‘Cassandra Dankworth.’

‘Baker.’

‘Oh,’ I say with a small snort. ‘You mean for the booking. I thought maybe you just meant generally.’

Luckily nobody heard: Will is looking at his phone and the girl with the historically inauthentic costume is already leading us through the twenty-foot box to our round mahogany stools. It’s a very strange place. Combining corrugated steel with flocked wallpaper, fake duck heads and carved gold chairs is a courageous – and, some might argue, unsuccessful – decision.

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But Will clearly likes it, so I'm happy.

On the upside, it isn't often you hear the word *comestible* two nights running.

'Didn't you have the fricassee last night?' We delicately perch like sparrows, facing the wall, and look at the menus. 'Remember? We talked about how mace the spice comes from the outer shell of the nutmeg, but mace the *weapon* is capsaicinoid-based and named after the bludgeoning stick from ancient Greece, and only one of them should be sprinkled on chicken?'

Admittedly, all of that conversation came from me.

Will nods, still staring at his phone screen, so I take another look around the restaurant while I wait for him to re-engage. I wonder what was shipped in here originally. Cereal? Soap? Books? If the latter, I would argue that turning it into this place was a downgrade.

'What are you talking about, Cass?' My boyfriend finally looks up. 'We didn't come here last night.'

'Umm.' I blink. 'Yes, we did.'

'No, we didn't.' Will sweetly pours me water from the jug before I knock it over both of us again. 'I was in the studio all night, panic-editing some film.'

'Wrong.' I look around and point. 'We sat right *there*. You ordered the Fricassee with Goosed-berries and I ordered the Beet Root Pan Cakes – four words – and then I got upset because you put your spoon in my cream puff.'

'Nope.' Will laughs. 'Although that *does* sound a lot like something you'd do.'

'You'd licked it! You put your saliva in my pudding!'

'We have sex, Cass.' He smiles and looks down at the menu. 'I frequently put my spoon in your cream p—'

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‘Will,’ I interrupt quickly before the waitress hears and assumes we are something casual and short-term, which we are demonstrably not. ‘They are *tangibly* different situations. We also kiss, but it doesn’t mean I get to spit in your mouth while you’re asleep.’

He laughs. ‘*Do* you spit in my mouth when I’m asleep?’

‘No,’ I say hotly, ‘because it’s about *consent*.’

I did memorise the menu of this place in detail *and* google photos of it in preparation *and* ring the restaurant to ask for vegetarian options *and* do a dry run of the location on the way to work *and* peer through the window, so there’s a very solid chance I’ve researched myself into a bunch of fake memories again.

Plus we have arguments about Will’s disgusting hygiene habits a lot: he has zero food boundaries.

‘Fine,’ I relent, picking up a roll of ‘wite bred’ even though I’m pretty sure that’s not how it was spelled in the eighteenth century either. ‘You win. I think maybe I’m just really tired. It’s been a very . . . confusing day.’

Under the bar top, Will gently puts a hand on my thigh. Not for the sexy reason you might think: my right foot is repeatedly kicking the corrugated wall so hard it sounds like a tin drum and our neighbours keep glaring at us.

With effort, I squeeze my hands together and focus on that pressure instead.

Will’s eyes are soft. Too soft. ‘What happened?’

I flush and look away. ‘Well . . .’

‘Hello, our valued patrons!’ Lipstick and Lace Girl is back. ‘Are you ready to Baroque and Roll? Drinks? Can I suggest a couple of glasses of Puss and Mew?’

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‘Just regular red wine, please,’ Will says with the kind of authority that comes right from the base of your soul, like the garlic and onions in a home-made soup. ‘The chicken for me, and . . . did you say you wanted the beetroot pancakes, Cass?’

‘I didn’t say I wanted it,’ I mumble, hungrily stuffing a bread roll into my mouth and suddenly realising I forgot to eat today. ‘I said it’s the only thing on the entire menu that doesn’t contain internal organs.’

‘You’re funny!’ The waitress scribbles in her notepad and I’m not sure if she’s written that down too, like a therapist. ‘Have you guys had a good day so far?’

And they’re off: chatting about the weather, which inexplicably leads to how long the restaurant has been open and what profits are like around here and whether they’re thinking of eventually setting up a permanent base, while I study the menu as if it’s *The Iliad*. How do people do this? How do total strangers weave conversation back and forth like this without tying themselves up in knots? How do they know what to say next? More importantly, *why*? It’s like watching a musical where they all break into the same dance without rehearsing it first: totally inexplicable.

The waitress finally leaves with our order and I feel Will assessing me.

‘Cassie,’ he says quietly.

I look up. ‘Yes?’

‘You realise we were just talking, right?’

Now I’m really confused. ‘Yes.’

‘So what’s with the face?’

‘The face? Which face? *My* face?’ I pick up a knife and

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hold it up but it's too deliberately tarnished to see anything. Embarrassed, I start frantically rubbing at the dried fake blood from the protest. 'Will, why didn't you say something?'

'Why didn't I say something about what?' Will puts his hand on my bouncing leg again. 'What's going on? Talk to me, Cass. You're all over the place this evening.'

I breathe out slowly. Oh, not much going on, Will. Just dumped myself, went into unnecessary mourning, got fired, stole a plant, had the plant taken back off me again, cried over a muffin, got covered in blood and imploded in the doorway of a Dickens pun. None of which makes me sound like a woman you want to hold on to permanently and I've only just got you back.

'I'm fine,' I say, smiling widely. 'Thank you for asking. How are you?'

'I'm excellent.' Will looks up as our food arrives looking – a very real bolt of confusion – *exactly* like I knew it would, despite the lack of photographic evidence. 'I'm brilliant, actually. I just got some great news, but . . .'

My boyfriend looks at his maced chicken, then back at me, then back at his chicken. I suddenly sense a torrent of colours: a strange mix I can't untangle, like a ball of different-coloured wools. There's something new in his eyes too, but I can't read that either.

'So I just got offered an assignment in India.' Will reaches for his wine and takes a way too big mouthful. 'To shoot a documentary on pangolins. I'm leaving on Saturday, for a month.'

What in the love of basic narrative continuity is going on?

'Yes,' I frown, putting my fork down. 'I know.'

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