

PIGEON TITS

I'm running late.

Not that I'm actually *running*. I don't think I've ever run in my entire life. Thank *God* I'll get to drop PE next year. I reckon I've spent most of my education hatching plans to get out of cross-country or swimming. I even claimed to have asthma in Year Six so the teachers would get off my back for 'not trying'. It was believable enough; the asthmatic girls always outran me anyway.

So, okay, I'm not running, but I *am* in a hurry.

Today is officially my day off work, and it has so far consisted of about twelve slices of toast, a box of Jaffa Cakes, one and a half documentaries on Netflix and a gazillion repeats of *The Shangri-La's Greatest Hits*, which inspired two hours of hair and make-up 'experiments'. Unfortunately Tony, my boss, called me mid-fringe trim.

I had him on speaker phone while I concentrated on my 'do, and agreed to trek into work for some announcement or training or something . . . I just couldn't seem to get my fringe even and kept snipping away. Now it looks less Bettie Page and more like a nit-recovery hair-hack.

Here I am, sweating my way up the hill towards town, the evidence of the Great Fringe Assassination sticking to my forehead already. Holly's house is on the way; I text her to say I'm a lot nearer than I really am. She'll know I'm late. I'm the one who's always late. She's the one who can fit a McDonald's straw in the gap between her two front teeth.

Greysworth town centre on a summer's afternoon. The *sights*. Everywhere I look I see flipflops smacking onto swollen, cracked heels as they tread past empty shop units. Lads on bikes, riding with no hands and no shirts as they suckle on sports bottles, looking like big, bald babies. I pass a man urinating against the window of M&S. It's slightly uphill so the pee trickles back down towards him and over his shoes.

I'm trudging along the main road in the blistering heat when all of a sudden I hear, 'OI-OIIII!!! NICE ARSE!!!!'

A white van hurtles past with two rowdy lads inside. The bloke in the passenger seat pokes his head out of

the window with his tongue flapping out of his mouth. He looks like an actual dog. I feel my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Since I started working at Bennett's Bookshop two months ago, I've made an attempt to read my way through the entire Women's Studies section and, believe me, I've read enough by now to know that men shouting things about my body as I mind my own business is *not* a compliment; it's actually street harassment.

Nice arse. They have no idea.

It makes my menstrual blood *boil* to be spoken to like that.

I'm still seething when I see Holly.

'Hi, Hols. Would you rather suffocate a sexist creep to death with pickled-onion crisp packets or fling a used tampon through the window of his white van of misogyny?'

'*Who?* What are you talking about?'

I relay the sorry tale to my bestie as she rolls her eyes and links her arm in mine.

She groans. 'What *is* it with blokes thinking they can do that? It's so boring. So unoriginal. Don't they know that we've heard it all before? *I* spent the whole of Year Six being referred to as "Pigeon Tits" by that idiot Charlie Jones and his mates! *Remember?!*'

‘I do remember.’ Throwback to what a pain in the ovaries *he* was. ‘I remember him singing “Come Fly With Me” at you as he rubbed his nipples through his sweatshirt. Shame that level of creativity seems to be lost on the white-van men of this town.’

She shakes her head with disgust. ‘Crisps are far too good for that *nice-arse* loser, *especially* pickled onion! Soggy tampon for him. Easy.’

As I smile, I notice Holly’s eyes move up towards my forehead. ‘It looks so, so bad, doesn’t it?!’ I cringe, trying to smooth the hair down with my fingers, like this will somehow magic back some length.

‘No, it’s just a lot shorter than usual . . .’

‘I blame whatever’s going on at Bennett’s. Tony interrupted my snipping session.’

‘He sounded so stressed out when he called, didn’t he?’

I laugh. Tony is always stressed. ‘Pffft, what’s *new*, pussycat?’

CASUALTY OF THE HIGHSTREET

Here we are. Bennett's Bookshop. The only bookshop this side of Milton Keynes.

You could be anywhere once you're in here. When you're inside you don't have to know that you're in crappy old Greysworth. You don't even have to know that you're a sixteen-year-old girl with a wonky fringe and occasional acne breakouts; you can just live somebody else's adventure. You can live in somebody else's world.

Bennett's has this smell: the dustiness of the old wooden shelves and that papery smell of new books. It's defo in my Top Ten Smells, somewhere with petrol stations and new shoebox smell. It's cool and dark in here, a proper oasis away from the *buzzing metropolis* we've left outside, and is closing early for 'staff training purposes'. Me and Holly make our way through the

maze of shelves and head upstairs to the staffroom as Maxine politely asks the *only* customer in the shop to leave.

‘Hey, Adam!’ I whisper, as I creep alongside one of my favourite Bennett’s full-timers.

‘Hey, sit here.’ He pats the plastic chair pulled up next to him. ‘How are you doing?’

There’s a paper plate of Mr Kipling Cherry Bakewells untouched on the coffee table. Usually free cakes don’t last *seconds* around here; what’s wrong with everybody?

‘Umm . . . okay . . . a little confused . . .’ I look around for a clue as to why everyone is so tense in here. ‘How are you?’

He scrunches his nose. ‘I’ll be fine.’ His eyes are closed as he says it.

‘Pssssst!’ Holly squeezes onto the same tiny plastic chair as me and glances at Tony. Like we’re in school and hope the supply teacher won’t notice that we’ve got one buttock per person squashed on to the seat. ‘What’s going on, Adam?’

‘I don’t know any more than you do.’ He looks away from us and watches a guy in a suit who nods towards Tony once it’s confirmed that we are all here. He can start.

‘Right, as you all know, my name is Mick Morgan.

I'm the regional manager for Bennett's Book's Midlands branches . . .'

I've literally never seen this guy in my life before. Ever.

Glad that thought was just to myself and not out loud. Adam would have literally killed me for using 'literally' incorrectly.

Tony's arms are folded and he stares at the worn used-to-be-blue carpet. He looks very uncomfortable.

' . . . I'm afraid I'm here with bad news today. I have a statement from head office that I have to read out to you, so I'll go through this and then I can try to answer any questions you have at the end . . .'

My colleagues shift uneasily in their chairs.

Holly squeezes my left elbow and Adam exhales.

'As you will know, Bennett's Greysworth has been underperforming over recent years. Despite the efforts from staff and numerous customer service initiatives directed by head office, Bennett's Greysworth has failed to improve on budget.'

Failed. Ouch. This can't be good.

'With the landlords of the shop keen to demolish and redevelop the property into "multiple state-of-the-art retail units" head office does not see a realistic future for Bennett's Greysworth in a location that will inevitably

become unaffordable. It is with deep regret that I am here to inform you that Bennett's, Greysworth branch, will be closing.'

Crap.

'You will receive individual letters explaining how much redundancy pay you are entitled to. You will be asked to work four weeks' notice and will be granted any time off required for job interviews.'

Four weeks?! Is that it?!

Nikki, one of the women who works here full-time, is crying. Her big eyes are watery and the corners of her mouth turn all the way down.

Adam's eyes are fixed on his battered-up Vans.

Maxine glares back at Mick Morgan, who looks very sheepish, and Tony pipes up.

'I'm so, so sorry about this, everybody. I'm so sorry we couldn't make it work.'

We couldn't make it work.

What about our little bookshop family? Surely this can't *actually* happen.

'I don't like this any more than you lot do. It's heartbreaking to see another Bennett's close. Just another casualty of the high street.' Our regional manager shakes his head. 'It's not the nineties any more. People just aren't

buying books in the way they used to.'

Those words hang in the hot air of the overcrowded staffroom. I look at Tony, who clenches his jaw.

Tony's been here the longest. Apparently, Adam told me, he's approaching his *twentieth* year here. Which is too crazy for me to get my head around. He's been here longer than I've been *alive*. So while my milk teeth were falling out at birthday parties in Pizza Hut or The Funky Forest soft play area, Tony was here. While I cut myself shaving my legs for the first time, Tony was here. While I had my braces put on and while I had them ripped off three years later, Tony was here. Demolishing Bennett's would be like demolishing Tony.

Yes, he's perpetually in a foul mood. No, he's barely spat two words at me since I started working here, but he *did* give me and Holly jobs, and, who knows, maybe seeing the way 'bookselling has changed' has made him the troll he is today.

'I'm going out for a fag,' Maxine declares as she leaves the staffroom, evidently wounded by Mick's news.

'I think we could all do with a cuppa,' Nikki says as she blows her sad nose into an already-cried-in tissue. 'Who's up for the Bridge Cafe?'

Mick looks relieved that it's his cue to leave and he

gathers his stuff at the same time all of us do.

I look at the gloomy faces around me and I can't take it any more. I have to say something.

'Well, *I* think we should stop Bennett's from closing.'

BOOKSHOP TOSSEERS

Mick Morgan gazes down at me wearily.

‘And who are you?’

‘I’m Paige.’

‘*You’re* Paige. Paige Turner! When I saw your name on the payroll I thought *surely that’s a pseudonym!*’

Okay.

So, if my life was some cheesy sitcom, this is the bit when I’d click my fingers and everyone in the frame would freeze on the spot. Mick Morgan would be mid-LOL JK at that complete and utter *eye-roll* of a line and Holly would be stuck cringing at that being the billionth time she’s watched me endure it.

My name is Paige Turner. It hasn’t *always* been my name. I don’t *really* have the cruellest parents in the world. I

was born Paige Campbell back when my mum and dad were happily married. Then when I was thirteen they got divorced after Mum found out Dad had been having a six-month affair with some chick he worked with. I obviously took my mum's side, and changed Campbell to her maiden name – Turner – in solidarity. I know it's a stupid name, but I did it for my mum and I'd do it again. Even though it means I face the lifetime inevitability of Christmas-cracker-worthy jokes from guys like Mick.

Our gang of reject booksellers, and Mick, are making our way to the front door of the shop.

Every town has a Bennett's. Just like every town has a Shoe Zone or a group of panpipe-playing buskers. If we go, then all this town centre will have left is . . . discounted shoes and panpipers.

'Really, though, even if it means *chaining* ourselves to the shutters, they *can't* close Bennett's down.'

'Yes, Paige!' Holly is behind me, sliding a paper plate of Mr Kipling cakes into her bag.

Mick Morgan grimaces, like all this talk of action is making him uneasy.

'Someone should do something . . . *We* should do something!' I stomp my foot. I physically *put my foot down*.

‘I guess that someone could be us . . .’ Adam laughs.

We answered an online quiz last week that revealed we are *BFFs* (Best *Frolleagues* Forevs). Basically that means that we are friends who started off as work colleagues. I was buddied up with him on my first day. We bonded over a mutual love of sixties girl bands as he trained me on the tills and warned me about the weirdest customers I’d encounter. He makes the best playlists and we play them through the ancient speakers when we’re on shifts together.

‘What should we do?’

We gather outside the front of the shop, where Maxine points a manicured nail in the air. ‘I’m calling a Disgruntled Bookseller Meeting! The usual table at The Bridge. I’ll be off to buy more fags first. All are welcome to attend.’ She glides past us all and heads to the corner shop up the road, her straight grey bob disappearing along the high street.

Mick raises his eyebrows at Tony. ‘Good luck, mate.’

Tony looks incredibly uncomfortable. It’s pretty obvious to me that they are anything but mates. That if Tony had Facebook (if he was, like, fifty years younger) he wouldn’t even *respond* to a friend request from Mick.

‘Best of luck to all of you. Any questions, drop me an email.’ Mick waves a thick hand in our direction and off he goes.

I know we shouldn't *shoot the messenger* or anything, but I'm defo imagining shooting him with one of those Super Soaker water pistols that have made every summer of my life an older-sister hell. I'm thinking water guns, but I'm pretty sure Tony and possibly Adam are fantasising about real bullets puncturing the back of Mick's shiny suit.

We stand around as Tony rolls down the metal shutter. It's an old shutter, not like the one they have across the road at JD Sports. They just press a button. Tony has to wind this Victorian-style lever thing around until it rolls down. It's an effort. He's working up a sweat. Unlit cigarette balancing between his lips.

The thought of looking for a new job around here is worrying. Mum was made redundant four months ago and isn't having any luck finding something new. I *need* to work so I can save up for uni. I'll take out a student loan, but from what I've heard that will barely cover my rent. I can't stay here forever; without a job I'll never afford to escape. As Tony wrestles with the shutter, I glance at the empty shop units along the high street. There's nothing else here.

A couple of topless lads stride past and snigger, shirts hanging from the waistbands of their football shorts. One has a particularly bad case of bacne, which isn't his fault

obviously, but people in glass houses and all that. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts, 'WAHEEEY, BOOKSHOP TOSSERS!'

Hilarious. Even Tony laughs. He drops his fag out of his mouth and it lands on the pavement. The really scummy part of the pavement by the shutters that always looks wet, even today when it hasn't been raining. All eyes are on him to see whether he'll pick it up and put it back in his mouth. There's no way I'd eat or smoke anything off this street. The three-second rule does *not* apply.

Way too gross.

It kinda looks like he's considering it.

Just then I hear knocking. Banging on glass.

It's loud.

It's coming from the window.

There's someone in the window display, trapped inside the shop.

'Oh Christ, that's all we need!' Tony's ready to explode as he starts frantically winding the shutter back up.

The lurker moves towards the door and is on the other side of the glass as Tony struggles with the ancient shutter.

It slowly reveals two feet. Big feet, boy feet, in battered old brogues. They look like they're dusty and splattered with paint. White paint, fleshy pink paint.

The ankles are bare and skinny.

Two long legs. Two legs that seem to go on for miles. Black jeans, ripped on one knee, but not the kind of rip that Topman cut into their clothes on purpose.

Holly giggles and Adam tuts, but I need them all to shut up because something huge is happening here and I'm not sure what it is yet.

I'm well aware that my mouth is hanging open. I'm catching flies. I can't tear my eyes away from the Big Reveal behind this shutter.

It gets stuck and Tony motions for Adam to give him a hand. 'As if head office aren't giving us enough grief already! This is *exactly* the kind of thing they expect from our *underperforming* branch!'

Tony isn't even muttering any more. He's pretty much wailing. And I can *see* the sweat on his head.

The more the shutter rolls up, the hotter I feel. Sweaty and cold at the same time.

The boy behind the glass is not the kind of crusty nose-picker we usually find around here.

He's kinda cute.

In fact, he's very cute.

He's tall and his shoulders hunch slightly. His hair is dark and thick and longish but not *long* long.

Tony yanks the door open and spits, 'What do you think you're doing?!'

The Boy speaks and time stands still:

'I-I'm sorry, I've just been here reading. I didn't realise you were closed.'

He pushes his hair back when it flops into his eyes. In his other hand he holds a large hardback.

It's a book on Egon Schiele. Ooooh. Freaky nudes. Yes. Oh God, yes. I want to talk. I want to tell him about how much I love Egon Schiele's portraits. About how I wrote an essay about him before Christmas for the Art History module we did with Mr Parker and how isn't it crazy that those paintings were done such a long time ago but really not a lot has changed. Bodies still look like bodies, right? I want to talk. I want to say so much. I want to ask him who the hell he is. But I'm stunned. Well and truly stunned into silence.

'Didn't you hear the announcements?' Tony isn't taking this well.

The guy shrugs and shakes his head. His beautiful head.

'And you didn't think it was odd that all the lights just turned off?!' Tony's ready to blow.

'I'm sorry.'

The boy looks over at me and when we make eye contact

it feels like I've stuck my fingers in the sockets and pulled the hairdryer into the bath all at the same time. Wow.

'Why didn't you just get out when we told you to?!'

I'm totally looking him up and down. This is shameful. If I was some creep at a bus stop behaving this way, I'd totally tell myself to get lost right about now.

Nikki puts her hand on Tony's shoulder, like she's some East-End barmaid preventing a punch-up in the Queen Vic.

'I think you should leave.'

'NO!'

For a split second, I'm not certain whether I said 'no' out loud or just thought it in my head.

But then Holly starts creasing up and Adam frowns a 'what?' at me and I realise it wasn't inside my head; it was out of my big fat lips and audible.

The Most Beautiful Boy In The History Of The World walks along the high street; away from me as Tony asks if that was a friend of mine.

'No. No. No, I mean, *no, Bennett's can't close*. That's what I meant when I said "no", so -'

Tony exhales dramatically and picks the cigarette up off the ground. Oh God. It's *well* beyond the three-second rule now. He holds it to his lips and lights it up. None of us are willing to challenge or ridicule him on this; we just

watch in disbelief as he turns back to the shutter.

‘Did you just *see* that?’ I claw on to Holly’s wrists as we walk, wanting confirmation that I didn’t *imagine* that beautiful, mythical creature of a boy.

‘Ummm, *yes*, who *is* he?!’

‘*He* is – I don’t know who he is! But I have to find out! Where did he *go*?’

‘Did you *see* that way he looked at you? OH EM GEE.’ Holly swoons as she slumps onto the side of the sculpture monument thing outside the empty BHS.

‘What? How did he look at me?!’ I didn’t imagine it! I didn’t imagine it!

Holly does her best impressions of him swinging his head round to me and doing some intense stare. It’s ridiculous but it’s hilarious.

‘Oi, c’mon, you two!’ Adam reminds us, calling from the gaggle of booksellers trudging in the opposite direction.

SUGAR TEARS

We file into the Bridge Cafe. There's wooden panelling and framed landscapes on the walls. And wipe-clean seats and artificial flowers in vases alongside bottles of ketchup and mayo. It's familiar. It's just up the road from Bennett's. It's The Place to gather for a WTF-Just-Happened meeting.

We're hit by that fatty smell that when you're starving smells delicious, but otherwise is just pretty gross. The kind of smell that makes you try hard to breathe through your mouth and think about washing the clingy stink out of your hair as soon as you get home.

I'm not hungry. This is rare. I'm ready to blame my lack of appetite for fried things on the sad circumstances that brings us all here. I mean, it's a massive shock so it must be that, right? It's not that since that ABSOLUTE BEAUT of a boy looked me RIGHT IN THE EYES my

stomach has felt like it's been flipped upside down. Like that feeling you get when you drop from the highest point on a Thorpe Park rollercoaster.

'To Bennett's!' Bruce, one of the Bennett's old timers, holds up his mug of builder's tea to make a toast.

'Twenty years . . .' Tony speaks to the table. His head is propped up by his elbows. 'Twenty years . . . to become a "*casualty of the high street*". . . '

Holly insisted she was 'too devastated to possibly order a milkshake' but lo and behold, within seconds of mine being slammed onto the tabletop, her Rimmel London lips are slurping on my straw and she's downing my drink.

'But we can't just *let* this happen!' I say.

I don't know what would happen if Bennett's actually went. I can't imagine any shop that would take its place. In fact, the saddest thing is that maybe *nothing* would take its place. The high street is made up of more empty units than open shops. Is there really a queue of businesses lining up to pay an even higher rent to a swanky new space?

And if Bennett's Greysworth was to go, then we'd have to get a *train* to the nearest bookshop. And I wouldn't get a staff discount or first dibs on any of those books. I wouldn't be able to sit behind the counters in those bookshops, pretending to actually enjoy coffee and dipping into a

book that makes me look sophisticated and intellectual.

Holly's Best Mate Telepathy kicks in when she whines, 'We can't close now – the third and final book in the *I'm a Murderer* trilogy isn't published until the end of the year, and I *still* don't know who the murderer is!'

Holly's into really gory crime thrillers. Even more so since we started at Bennett's and she's had open access to all those books that are banned from our school library.

This shop has been part of my childhood for as long as I can remember.

I think about all the Christmas book tokens I've splurged there, the hours I spent with Holly on the way home from school. Part of the reason we were employed at the same time was because Tony couldn't tell us apart; he'd only seen us together. 'Joined at the hip.' We'd sit back to back reading passages from saucy romance novels to each other until we'd be interrupted. Then we'd try to look sensible, which is way harder than it sounds when the last words you uttered were 'throbbing member'.

I shake away that thought as my colleagues round the table talk. Holly pours low-fat sweetener on the table and moves it around with her fingers making it into the shape of a sad face. Sugar tears.

Throwback to when we received phone calls from

Bennett's to say they wanted to offer us part-time jobs. It was almost too good to be true – being *paid* to spend time in a bookshop, with my best friend! We danced in the corridor at school and Bitchy Mrs Bradley swung the music-room door open and told us to keep it down, didn't we have revision or something more important to be getting on with? We didn't revise that night, instead we bought a huge bag of candyfloss and scoffed the lot until we felt like we might be too sick to turn up for our first shifts.

'C'mon, you lot . . .' I start up again. 'Didn't you hear what Mick-whatever-his-name-is said? We've got four weeks before they kick us out and knock the place down. So we've got *four weeks* to do *something* to change their minds . . .'

Adam winces. 'Do you really think anything we do will change their minds?'

Tony isn't joining in. He drains the last bit of his coffee and gets up to order another.

Bruce raises his eyebrows. 'It could be worth a try . . .'

'Thank you, Bruce!'

'We don't exactly have anything left to lose, do we?' Maxine agrees.

'It won't be as easy as you might think, Paige. It's all about money. The landlords will make more of it on rent

once they've got us out of the way and built some flashy new units . . .' One of the blokes who works Monday to Friday tries to reason with me. I didn't expect everyone to be so negative. So afraid that we could fail.

'Well, okay . . .' I place my hands on the sticky tabletop, to try to get my thoughts in order, and I instantly regret it when the vinegary residue sticks to my palms. 'In an ideal world, who would want to stay at Bennett's for longer than the next four weeks? Raise your hand.'

Eight out of eight isn't bad.

'Okay, so, let's *say* something, publicly, about staying open. Let's tell people that we don't want to leave.'

Tony glares at me. He looks . . . *irritated*. Like I'm saying all of this to cause trouble in some way. I'm not. I'm trying to save his shop. *Our* shop.

'It'll work out. We can work it all out.' I nod, trying my best to reassure him.

Holly shouts out 'Yeah!' in BFF solidarity.

'We could do something, I'm not sure what yet, but like a protest, or a petition –'

'A petition would be good.' Adam nods in agreement.

'We can't be the only ones in this town who don't want to see the back of the bookshop . . . Think about all of the regular customers –'

‘Why not?’ Bruce’s smile is wide and I catch a glimpse of the tooth he’s missing towards the back of his gums.

I’m scribbling all of the ideas that are flooding my brain into the pink Moleskine notebook I keep in my bag. Adam and the others are feeding me with suggestions, and eventually I work up an appetite and order a plate of chips.

I might just be the bookshop girl with a bad fringe, who’s using books to jump into other peoples’ lives. Maybe nobody cares about what *I* think, but if there’s a whole *group* of us, who all stand up against what we think is unfair, then we’ll be impossible to ignore. We should be loud about our plans. We should tell everybody what we think. We should save our bookshop and our jobs. *We should do something.*

SERIOUS FITTIE

My phone pings. I had no idea it was that time already. A text from Mum flashes up on my screen asking if I want a lift home. She's finished her CV-writing workshop. It's this class she has to do to qualify for her Jobseeker's Allowance. I jump out of my oilcloth-covered seat for a chance to bypass a blistery walk.

'See you tomorrow then, Holly-wood!' I blow her a kiss while she squeezes a sachet of ketchup onto yet another bowl of chips.

Texting Mum to say I'll be there in a sec, I navigate my way past the hair extensions and heels and eyelashes and bad tattoos and aftershave and *sorry darlin's* along the pavement, feeling like I've successfully managed to indoctrinate the others with my vision of a Bookseller Uprising.

I hear the car before I see it. Mum's sitting in the Fiat Punto with windows rolled down and 'Ghost Town' by The Specials blasting full volume.

When I get in the passenger seat she turns it down. 'Hey, baby! How was your day?'

'Hmmm . . . Well, some random bloke in a suit came to tell us that they want to demolish Bennett's.'

She twists the volume all the way down in disbelief. 'You are joking?!'

'No, really. But it's all going to be fine, because we're going to make sure they can't close us down . . .'

'Oh, Paige, that's such a shame. It would be terrible if it closes. There's nowhere else to get books around here. And y'know what I heard today? Right, listen to this: the council are making cuts so the library will be closed on *weekends*! Can you *believe* that? It's disgusting. People *rely* on that service.'

I stare out of the window, at TO LET signs plastered on every other empty shop unit along the Welly Road. Some joker has been at every one with a spray can and added an 'I' in the middle, so now they all read 'TOILET.' I snigger while she's mid-rant.

'It's hardly Banksy, is it?' Mum LOLs at her own joke. 'At least we could keep each other company, y'know, glamorous

mother-and-daughter trips to the jobcentre!’

I picture the two of us in fluffy white robes, kicking back on sunloungers and sipping champagne while we have our nails filed and make a long list of our transferable skills.

No way.

I *have* to do something about Bennett’s.

At home, Elliot rushes to the front door to let us in. He’s a few years younger than me and still finds running around outdoors fun. He’s been playing football in the park all day, and hasn’t changed out of his muddy shorts. His game of *FIFA* is paused on the TV screen and he’s halfway through a tube of salt and vinegar Pringles. Hashtag living the dream.

‘That was here for you when I got in, Paige.’ He points to a padded brown envelope. I clutch it to my chest, already knowing what’s inside. Another chunky prospectus from another university. I’m collecting them. Arty courses up and down the country. I don’t know where I want to go yet, but I still have an excruciatingly long amount of time to decide. At the moment I’m coveting these brochures like they’re sacred texts, keeping them all together in an old plastic toy box in my room.

‘Thanks, Elliot!’ I dash upstairs and shove the envelope under my bed. Saving it for later.

Through dinner and through *University Challenge* and even when we hear the ice-cream van chime some dodgy version of ‘Greensleeves’ as it does a U-turn in our road (and Elliot asks if we can get something and Mum says, ‘We’ve got choc ices in the freezer if you *really* want an ice cream,’ and neither me nor my brother is surprised because it’s a tale as old as time) That Boy, who was locked in the shop, is in the back of my mind. Moving around my head on a loop like an overused GIF. I keep going over the moment we both looked at each other and remembering how it felt. Like a scene on *24 Hours in A&E*.

They’d slide me out of a stretcher and onto a table where people in plastic disposable aprons would rush around me and cut off my jeans and apologise for ruining my clothes and I’d be, like, ‘It’s okay,’ as I’d stare up towards the ceiling with my head in one of those neck-brace things and a paramedic would be, like, ‘This is Paige Turner; she’s sixteen years old. After a collision with a Serious Fittie she’s suffered a cardiac arrest. She’s a casualty of the high street.’