

ALEXANDRA POTTER

confessions
of a forty-
something
f###k up

MACMILLAN

JANUARY

#whatthefuckamIdoingwithmylife

New Year's Day

How the hell did I get here?

Not *here* here, as in January, never-ending month of grey and gloom that seems to go on forever, filled with depressing Blue Mondays, failed attempts at resolutions, and an Instagram feed overflowing with celebs boasting about 'New Year! New Exciting Projects!' – which does not make me feel #inspired and want to reach for their exercise video or Book of Brag (sorry, I mean Blessed), but has the opposite effect of making me collapse back down on the sofa, feeling #overwhelmed with a family-size packet of cheese puffs.

No, I mean here as in it's my birthday soon, I'm about to turn *forty-something*, and it's just not how I'd imagined. I mean, how did this happen? It's like I missed a turning somewhere. Like there was a destination marked 'Forty-Something' and my friends and I were all heading that way, youth in one hand, dreams in the other, excited and full of possibilities. A bit like when you step off the plane on holiday and you go down those moving walkways that swoosh you along with everyone else, following the signs to baggage reclaim, eager to see what's on the other side of those sliding doors.

Except it's not the Bahamas and tropical palm trees; it's Destination Forty-Something and comprises a loving husband, adorable children and a beautiful home. *Swoosh*. It's a successful career and bifold kitchen doors and clothes from Net-a-Porter. *Swoosh*. It's feeling happy and content, because

life is a success and all sorted out and you're exactly where you always imagined you'd be, complete with an Instagram account filled with #Imsoblessed and #livingmybestlife.

It is not, I repeat not, #wheredidIgowrong and #whatthefuckamIdoingwithmylife?

Sitting cross-legged on my bed, I glance around the room, noting the cardboard boxes in the corner and two large unopened suitcases. I still haven't finished unpacking. I stare at them, trying to summon up the enthusiasm, then sink back against the pillows. It can wait.

Instead my eyes fall upon the new notebook on my bedside table. I just bought it today. According to this article I'm reading, the secret to happiness is writing a daily gratitude list.

By writing down all the things you're grateful for, you will feel more positive, stop negative thought patterns and transform your life.

Reaching for the notebook, I pick up a pen and turn to the first page. I stare at the empty sheet of paper, my mind blank.

If you need some inspiration, here are a few things to get you going:

I am breathing.

Are you kidding me? Breathing? There's grateful and there's pretty much dead if that's not on my list.

I do not feel inspired.

Don't worry if you don't know what to write. Just start with one thing and work up to your five-a-day.

Right, OK. I'm just going to write the first thing that pops into my head.

1. My air miles

OK, so perhaps not *exactly* the kind of blessed and spiritual thing the author of the article had in mind, but trust me, I

was feeling very bloody blessed to have all those air miles when I flew back to London last week.

I've been living in America for the past ten years, five of them in California with my American fiancé. I loved California. The never-ending sunshine. Wearing flip-flops in January. Our little cafe-cum-bookshop which we sank all our savings into, with its delicious brunches and walls lined with books. I was happy and in love and engaged to be married. The future stretched ahead like candy-coloured bunting. Everything was going to work out just like I'd always hoped.

But then our business went bust and our relationship along with it and – *poof* – it all turned back into a pumpkin. I was not going to marry the prince and live happily ever after with our cute kids and adorable rescue dog. Instead I was going to pack up what was left of my life, cash in all my air miles for an upgrade, and sob my way across the Atlantic. Hell, if I was going to be broke and heartbroken, it was going to be on a flat bed with a cheese plate and a free bar, thank you very much.

In my gin-sozzled, cheese-and-crackered brain, I was planning to come back to London, rent my own flat, fill it with scented candles, and get my life back together again. My immigration visa was about to run out and I needed a fresh start, one that didn't constantly remind me of what I no longer had. Plus, Dad had generously offered me a loan to help me get myself back on my feet. My American dream was over: it was time to come home.

But things had changed since I'd left and I quickly discovered rents had doubled, nay, quadrupled. And gone was my tribe of single friends with their spare rooms and cheap bottles of wine, which we would drink until the early hours telling each other very loudly that he was a total bastard,

you're better off without him, and Do Not Panic! There's still plenty of time! All while reeling off a long list of celebrities who were much older than you and had managed to meet the man, push out a baby, and be in *OK!* magazine talking about their miracle birth Before It's Too Late.*

Now all my girlfriends are married, and their spare rooms are filled with babies and bunk beds and nursery-rhyme stickers, and it's cups of herbal tea and bed by 9.30 p.m. Which meant I had two choices: couch-surf with a cup of camomile, or move back in with The Parents.

Now, don't get me wrong. I love my parents. But this was never part of The Plan. Nowhere in my twenties and thirties did my vision for the future involve being single, over forty and sleeping in my old bedroom. Even if Mum had swapped the single bed for a double and redecorated with matching Laura Ashley lamps.

My old bedroom was for visits home with The American Fiancé, soon to be The Handsome Husband. For reliving childhood Christmases in the countryside with our growing rosy-cheeked brood. For weekends when The Parents looked after their beloved grandchildren while we hotfooted it to one of those fancy, overpriced boutique hotels with filament light bulbs draped over a bar, an organic menu filled with grass-fed this, that and the other, and massages that are never quite hard enough.

2. *Spareroomforrent.com*

It was actually my best friend Fiona who told me about it, her nanny having told *her* about it.

* Otherwise known as BITL. It used to be thirty-nine. Then it crept up to forty-two. Now it's whatever age you can get away with in good lighting.

‘You should do it, Nell! It sounds like a lot of fun!’ she said brightly across the Carrara marble worktops of her newly renovated open-plan kitchen, where I was slumped, depressed and jetlagged with a weak cup of some foul-tasting herbal tea, after she’d very kindly offered to put me up for a few days on flying back to London.

Fiona always thinks my life sounds fun. And it probably appears that way when viewed from the security of her happy family life. A bit like how bungee jumping or living in a two hundred square foot tiny house or dyeing your hair purple always looks like fun, when you’re not the one doing it.

I mean, don’t get me wrong. Bits of it have been a lot of fun. Just not the current bits.

‘That’s one way of putting it,’ I quipped, shooting Izzy, my five-year-old goddaughter, a smile as she tucked into her organic porridge. Personally, I had several other words in mind, but Auntie Nell must not say the naughty F word.

‘Your goddaughter thinks it sounds like fun, don’t you, darling?’ enthused Fiona, grabbing herself a bowl and sprinkling in a few fresh blueberries, some chia seeds and a dollop of manuka honey.

I love Fiona – we’ve been friends since university – but she’s living in a completely different universe to me. Happily married to David, a successful lawyer, she’s now settled into a comfortable middle-class life in south-west London with their two lovely, privately educated children, a tasteful designer home, and the kind of swingy blonde hair that comes from a professional blow-dry and a great colourist.

Before having children, her job as a museum curator took her around the world, but she gave all that up when Lucas, her eldest, was born, and now her days are filled with myriad school events, remodelling the house, booking lovely family holidays in five-star resorts and doing Pilates.

Meanwhile, over on Planet What The Fuck Am I Going To Do With My Life:

‘You might meet some really interesting people.’

She was being so sweet and positive I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the thought of meeting interesting people in my pyjamas brought me out in hives. I didn’t want to share a fridge with strangers. Or, God forbid, a bathroom. It was fun when we were young, but not now. Now it was depressing and soul-destroying and just a little bit terrifying. I mean, I could be murdered in my bed by some weirdo flatmate, and end up chopped into little bits and sprinkled on the geraniums.

FORTY-SOMETHING MEETS GRISLY END IN FLATSHARE

Her life used to seem so promising, say shocked
parents, who were hoping for at least one grandchild.

I voiced my fears but Fiona pooh-poohed me briskly. Her nanny said it was brilliant and that through it she’d met lots of new friends. I didn’t point out that her nanny was a twenty-something from Brazil, so of course it was brilliant. Everything was brilliant at that age. Especially if you looked like Fiona’s nanny.

‘Come on, I’ll help you search,’ she announced, whipping out her iPad and closing down the John Lewis sale homepage. Within seconds she was enthusiastically swiping through photos, as if she was online shopping. Which technically she was. Only it wasn’t for a nice table lamp and a cashmere throw, it was for a home for her poor feckless friend.

‘Ooh, look! I’ve found it! This place is perfect!’

3. Arthur

The spare room was in an Edwardian maisonette in Richmond, a leafy suburb of London known for its village atmosphere

and family life. I'd been hoping for something more in town and less married with children, but it was available and I could afford it. Plus, when I went round to see it the room looked even larger than in the photos, and it had a little balcony. There was just one catch.

'And so this is the shared bathroom.'

Having finished showing me the bedroom, Edward, the owner of the flat and my prospective landlord, paused by the bathroom door.

'*Shared?*'

'Don't worry, I put the seat down – that's one of the house rules,' he joked, opening the door and pulling the light cord.

At least, I thought he was joking. Until I spied his toothbrush in the cup by the sink and my heart sank.

'OK, great.' I tried not to think of my ensuite back in California. This was going to be fun, remember. It was going to be like *Friends*, only we were in our forties and I looked nothing like Jennifer Aniston. I forced a bright smile. I could do this.

'So, do you have any questions?'

Edward looked older than me, with dark wavy hair that was greying at his temples and square-framed glasses, but I had a sneaking suspicion he was about my age. This keeps happening to me now. It's the weirdest thing. I read articles about middle-aged people as if they're my parents or something, and then I suddenly realize – hang on, we're the same age! But how can this be? I don't look anything like that. At least, I don't think I do.

Do I?

'Um . . . any other rules?' I joked weakly as I followed him back through to the kitchen.

'Yes, I've printed them out for you to have a look

through . . .’ Reaching into a drawer, he pulled out a ring binder and passed it to me.

‘Oh.’ There were about twenty pages, with lots of highlighted sections. ‘Gosh, that’s a lot of rules.’

‘I find it better to be clear about everything, don’t you? Then there’s no room for miscommunication.’

My eyes scanned over a few. It was just the usual stuff about loud music, being tidy and respectful, making sure to lock doors.

‘There’s also a section about being environmentally conscious and conserving energy.’

‘Right, yes, of course.’ Now this bit we were in agreement about. I’d spent the last five years living in California. I drove a Prius. I bought organic (when I could afford it). I had a nice selection of reusable bags made from bamboo for my groceries. ‘I’m all about saving the environment,’ I told him.

‘So, turn the lights off when you leave a room, take showers instead of baths—’

‘No baths?’ My chest tightened.

‘A five-minute shower uses about a third of the water of a bath, so it’s much more eco-friendly.’

‘Yes, of course.’ I nodded, and he was right, of course he was, but we weren’t in California any more, where there was a drought. We were in England, where it never stops raining. Last year my parents’ house flooded twice.

‘And I’d prefer it if you didn’t touch the thermostat for the central heating.’

Instinctively I pulled my coat tighter around me. It was freezing, even inside. I touched a radiator. It was stone cold.

‘Even in January?’

I mean, FFS. Who doesn’t have the heating on in January?

‘It’s set to 12.5 degrees, which is the most efficient setting.’

It was at that point I thought *Sod This*. Since breaking up with The American Fiancé, *Sod This* has become my new

approach to life. It's actually better than Fuck It. It requires less effort.

'Well, thanks very much. I've got a few more rooms I'm going to look at . . .'

Enough was enough. OK, so my life was a mess. Nothing had worked out. Time was running out and it just hadn't happened for me. I was still on the outside, waiting for my happy ever after, whatever that may be. I wasn't a wife or a mummy. Neither was I some high-flying *career woman*, which, according to a newspaper *Whose Name I Refuse To Mention*, is the reason all women *of a certain age* have got themselves into this position. I was an out-of-work book editor who sank all her savings into a business that went bust, along with her relationship. (On that topic, can someone please tell me why there is no such thing as a *career man*?)

I didn't juice, or bake, or cook healthy nutritious meals in my lovely kitchen, most probably because I currently didn't *have* a kitchen or my own home and, frankly, I'm useless anyway. I hadn't a fucking clue what was going on with Brexit and, more so, I didn't care. I didn't practise mindfulness. Or do yoga. Hell, I couldn't even touch my toes. And I did not have any social media accounts filled with thousands of liked photos documenting my perfect life.

'It was nice meeting you.' I made a move for the door.

'Actually, there was one more thing . . .'

I braced myself.

'I'm not here at the weekends.'

I paused. 'Excuse me?'

At which point Edward proceeded to tell me that he was married with twin boys. Married? He must have noticed my eyes shoot to his bare ring finger as he said something about having left it on the bathroom sink at home. Home being the countryside, where they'd moved 'for the schools', but

during the week he stayed in London to save on commuting. 'I leave on Friday morning and am not back until Monday evening, so you'd have the place to yourself.'

Hang on – I quickly did the maths. That meant I only had to share with him for three days? For four whole days I had the flat to myself?

'Except for Arthur.'

'Arthur?'

At the sound of his name a huge, hairy animal barrelled into the kitchen, nearly knocking me sideways with his enormous wagging tail.

'Arthur, sit. *Sit!*'

Arthur took absolutely no notice and continued excitedly jumping up and slobbering all over me, while his owner tried to wrestle him into some kind of sitting position.

'My wife Sophie has allergies, so he stays here with me,' he panted. 'But at weekends he would stay here with you . . . hence the rent has been adjusted accordingly.'

I looked at Edward. His glasses were askew and his sweat-shirt was covered in a fine smattering of white fuzz, which was flying around the room, transforming the kitchen into a giant dog-hair snow globe, while his sleeve was fast disappearing into Arthur's jaws.

'OK, great. When can I move in?'

4. *I am not dead of hypothermia.*

Small mercies and all that, but my landlord has gone skiing. He drove up from Kent to meet me at the weekend with the keys and Arthur, then hotfooted it to Heathrow to celebrate New Year's in Verbier with his family. As soon as he left I cranked up the thermostat to twenty-four degrees. So now it's lovely and toasty and I'm lying on my bed in just

my underwear. I can almost pretend I'm back in California.

On cue my eyes well up. No, I don't want to think about it. I haven't cried for a few days and I don't want to start.

I sniff hard and look at Arthur, who's asleep on the rug by the window, then back at my notebook. I've still got one more thing to write on my gratitude list to make it to my five-a-day, but I'm tired. I'm still battling jet lag. Nothing's springing to mind. I put it back on my bedside table. That's why they call it a daily practice. Tomorrow I'm sure I'll feel much more positive and inspired.

Yes, this year I'm going to completely turn my life around. New Year, fresh start and all that. In fact, by this time *next* year my gratitude list is going to go something like this:

I'm grateful for:

1. *My loving husband, who tells me every day how much he loves me with fresh flowers and mind-blowing sex.*
2. *Snuggles with our own little miracle, who showed her proud grandparents that Mummy was not a forty-something fuck-up for whom time finally ran out.*
3. *A successful, high-flying career that provides both satisfaction and a six-figure salary, which I will spend on lovely clothes I see in magazines, and not spend hours trying to find a cheaper version on eBay.*
4. *A Pinterest-worthy home in which to host lots of lovely grown-up dinner parties for all my friends, who are amazed by my flair for interior design and conjuring up delicious, nutritious meals, and teasingly call me the Domestic Goddess.*
5. *This feeling of strength and calm that comes from doing yoga in my new Lululemon outfits, and knowing I am finally where I want to be and am not going to die alone in newspaper shoes.*

The Following Friday

Oh God, it's my birthday.

Remember when you used to actually *look forward* to your birthday? When you'd wake up feeling all happy and excited and planning your barely there outfit? And the celebrations ended at 2 a.m. in a club somewhere, drinking vodka with all your mates and drunkenly yelling in some random bloke's ear, 'Fuck me, I'm twenty-six! I'm so old!'

Now I really *am* old.

Today when I wake up I feel like I already drank all the vodka. And as I reach for my ringing phone, I catch sight of my arm in the full-length mirror next to my bed and it hits me: This Is It. It's happened. It's time for a bit of a sleeve.

Everyone goes on about the big Four-O, but in reality turning forty is no big deal. Forty is easy. Forty is a big party and a new dress. Forty, you're still in finger-reaching distance of your thirties and nothing feels or looks any different. But then something happens overnight and suddenly you're *forty-something* and things have started to . . . how shall I put it?

Sag would be one word. Crinkle would be another. *Crinkle and Sag*. It sounds like a new flavour of crisps or a favourite pub, except it's neither. It's this strange thing that's happening to your body and you don't like it. You pull out your trusty

bikini for the summer holidays and start seriously wondering about a one-piece. You find a grey hair and *it's not up there*. It's the weirdest thing.

Time feels like it's speeding up. And running out. You start looking back, trying to figure out how on earth you got here, instead of forwards, as frankly it frightens the living daylights out of you. You're hurtling past the halfway mark *if you're lucky*, and nothing is how you thought it would be when you were yelling in strangers' ears in dodgy nightclubs.

But then maybe that's how everyone feels about their birthdays at this age. Though, judging by everyone's photos on Facebook, of weekends spent celebrating in cosy cottages in the Cotswolds and family selfies where everyone's wearing matching smiles and wellies – even the Labrador – I'm not convinced. They do not look shocked and bewildered at how this can be happening to them. They look like something from a J Crew catalogue.

Mum and Dad are the first to call and wish me a happy birthday.

'So have you heard from anyone else?' asks Mum, after Dad has finished singing and gone to his allotment.

Mum is fishing. I still haven't gone into the details about what happened with The American Fiancé, only that the wedding was off and I was moving back to London.

'Um . . . it's seven thirty in the morning, it's still a bit early.'

'What time is it in California?'

I knew it.

'Half past eleven the night before.'

'Is it really?'

In all the years I lived in America, Mum and Dad never got the hang of the time difference. Conversations always started with, 'What time is it there?' complete with flabbergasted

reactions when I told them, and I was forever getting woken up by FaceTime calls in the middle of the night. Because of course I couldn't turn my phone off, *in case something happens*. Which is another thing that happens when you reach a certain age. It's like the magnetic poles switch, and after years of your parents worrying about you, you start worrying about them. It's like having children, only I skipped the cute baby stage and mine are seventy and seventy-two.

'So it's not your birthday yet there, then?'

Poor Mum. I think she's clinging on to the hope that this break-up isn't permanent and the wedding will soon be back on.

'No, not yet.'

'Oh good.' She sounds relieved. 'So what are you going to do to celebrate?'

'I'm meeting friends for a drink.'

'Well, that sounds nice.'

'Yes, it'll be good to see everyone and catch up.'

'Because you know, your father and I are a bit worried about you—'

'Mum, I'm fine – honestly, you don't need to worry. As soon as I've sorted out a few things here, I'll come home for a couple of days.'

'That would be lovely.'

'OK Mum, bye—'

'I know what I wanted to tell you!'

You know how some words mean different things to different people? Well, the word 'bye' to my mum does not mean the end of the conversation. On the contrary, it means starting a whole new topic, usually involving telling me about someone I don't know, who is related to someone else I don't know, who lives next door to someone I truly have never heard of, who has died.

I brace myself.

‘If you do want to come and visit, we just need a little bit of notice now that we’re doing Airbnb.’

I stare at my phone, as if I’ve misheard.

‘*Airbnb?*’

‘Yes, didn’t I mention it? Your father and I watched a programme about it and decided to give it a go. We’ve been Airbnb’ing your old bedroom and we’ve been inundated with bookings.’

So that’s what the new matching Laura Ashley lamps were about.

‘We’ve got a lovely young couple staying this week, on honeymoon no less!’

And there you have it. Just when you think your life can’t get any worse, there’s always the discovery that a couple of newlyweds are shagging in your old bedroom to plunge you to new depths.

‘What about Richard’s old bedroom?’

‘Well, he comes home more often to visit.’

I grit my teeth as the knife turns. Richard is my little brother and he can do no wrong. He lives in Manchester and has a craft beer start-up with some friends. Every couple of weeks he visits my parents with bags of dirty laundry and a different girlfriend. Rich is thirty-nine and says he’s not ready to settle down yet, but no one is worried, least of all Rich. He’s a man. It’s different. There is no BITL.

‘OK, well I really have to go.’

‘Of course, you must be busy. Speak later. Have a lovely day!’

After I put the phone down I feel a bit guilty. I didn’t really have to go. It’s not as if I had a pressing engagement; like children to get ready for school or a job to go to. I think about my career, then try not to. It’s ten years since I moved

from London with my full-time job as a book editor to my publishing company's New York office. It was a great opportunity and the timing was perfect – a relationship had just ended and I was eager for a change of scene – and I threw myself into my new job, along with the New York dating scene.

But five years later I was still single and fast losing hope of ever meeting anyone. So when I met a handsome, dark-eyed chef in a bar, I followed both him and my heart to the West Coast where we got engaged, quit both our jobs and moved to Ojai, a small town north-west of Los Angeles, to open our little cafe-cum-bookshop. My parents were delighted but worried. I was gaining a fiancé but giving up a good job, and my dad urged caution.

But I was not in the mood for caution. I was in my late thirties. I had met The One. We were going to get married, have babies, and spend the rest of our lives together. Setting up our own business was the icing on the cake. It combined my love of books and his love of food, and we worked day and night to make it a success. So what if half of businesses failed in the first year? We would be in the other fifty per cent.

And for a few years we were – but eventually rising rents, long hours, fast-disappearing savings and a whole bunch of other stuff finally took its toll, on both the business and our relationship. So, here I am.

#singleunemployedandfortysomething

My phone beeps. It's my friend Holly. Holly is married to Adam and they have Olivia, who's three.

We can't make it tonight. The babysitter's sick! ☹☹ Sorry!!

I'll call you later. Happy birthday and have fun tonight! Xxxx

My phone beeps again. This time it's Max, who I met in a youth hostel in Rome when I was eighteen; we spent the summer backpacking around Europe together. He's married to Michelle now, and has three children and another on the way, but we've remained good friends. I'm even godmother to his eldest, Freddy.

Happy birthday Stevens! Totally forgot about this parent-teacher tonight. If I don't go Michelle will chop my balls off. Come over for dinner next week instead. M

Two down. One to go.

Fiona calls an hour later. 'You're going to kill me—'

In the end everyone cancelled. Which was fine. I totally understood. These things happen. Busy family lives and all that. It's just, well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a bit disappointed.

Oh, who am I kidding? I was totally bummed out. But not with my friends; with my situation. So I went to therapy. Of the retail kind.

As I hit the high street I feel immediately cheered up. Who needs a loving partner to take them for a romantic dinner in a lovely restaurant when there's a hot pink jumpsuit with cute little cap sleeves? Or children to make me birthday cards that I'll keep forever on the fridge, when I can actually find a pair of skinny white jeans that don't make me look fat? And so what if I don't have a job or my own home when there's a gorgeous pair of candy-striped straw stilettos I can afford with the birthday money Mum and Dad sent me?

Where exactly I'm going to wear skinny white jeans, hot pink jumpsuits and straw stilettos in the freezing cold weather that is January in London, I have no idea. Plus, I didn't

actually try any of it on as the queues were so long. But who cares about such niggling details, I decide later, as I head home from the high street on the bus, looking out of the window and merrily sipping one of those cans of pre-mixed gin and tonic. Birthday treat and all that.

It does briefly cross my mind that maybe this is how it starts. One minute it's your forty-something birthday, and you're shopping at Zara for a bit of a sleeve and enjoying a celebratory little cocktail on public transport. Then, before you know it, you're glugging whisky from a paper bag and it's all over. I suddenly feel like the girl on the train, only on a bus.

Oh God. Still, at least I'm not about to start murdering my exes.

I think about The American Fiancé and dig out my phone. *Nothing.*

And just like that my cheerful mood crumbles. Tears prickle my eyelashes and, blinking furiously, I stick my phone back in my pocket and reach into my shopping bag.

Sod This. I pull out another can.

I'm grateful for:

- 1. My mum and everything she does for me, and I look forward to finding availability to stay in my old bedroom.*
- 2. Zara, even though I can't get the jeans past my knees and the hot pink jumpsuit looks hideous on me.*
- 3. Whoever had the genius idea to pre-mix gin and tonic and put them in a nifty little can.*
- 4. The stranger, whose shoulder I fell asleep and drooled on, who woke me up before I missed my stop.*
- 5. That I don't have a corkscrew, and that my ex lives five thousand miles away.*

The Next Day

My head feels like it's about to explode.

That's it: I am never drinking again. I'm going to do dry January. OK, so it's a bit late considering we're a week in, but better late than never, right?

Right?

So, last night the plan was to stay in and attempt to cook my own fancy birthday dinner, only by the time I got home my desire to be a domestic goddess had deserted me. It was all too much effort for one person. Plus, once the buzz of the G&Ts started wearing off, it all felt a bit sad.

So instead I took Arthur out for a walk. I hadn't yet had a chance to explore my new neighbourhood and we zigzagged through unfamiliar lamp-lit streets. It felt strange to be back in London, though this was nothing like the London I remembered. Before I left for New York I rented a flat above a shop, slap bang in the middle of the city, with traffic, noise and pollution on all sides – but this was a much quieter suburb, with neat rows of flat-fronted cottages and smart Victorian terraces with chequerboard paths.

As I walked past, my gaze brushed over all the different windows, like flicking through a picture book. Inside all the homes I caught snapshots of family life. A mum in an upstairs window brushing her little girl's hair after her bath; a couple snuggled up together on the sofa watching TV, the screen reflected on their faces; a man with a backpack closing

the front door behind him to squeals of ‘Daddy’s home!’

I paused. If ever there was a metaphor for my life, this was it. Me on the outside, looking in on everyone on the inside. All these cosy scenes of domestic bliss. I gave a little shiver and pulled my woolly hat down over my ears. I was, quite literally, out in the cold.

And yet . . .

OK, so in the spirit of full disclosure, I have a confession.

As much as part of me craves all of this, there’s another part of me that fears it. The part of me that swore in her diary she’d never end up like her parents. That read books by torchlight under the bedcovers and dreamed of passionate romances and travel to far-off lands. That was determined to lead a life less ordinary, filled with freedom and excitement and adventure, *with something different*—

Yanked backwards by Arthur’s retractable lead, I turned to see him squatting on the driveway of a large house, doing a huge dump.

Meanwhile, here I was picking up dog shit.

I tried not to think about any more metaphors, but stuck my gloved hand in the poo bag and started scooping it up. I use the word ‘scoop’ as Arthur’s stomach is always off and it’s never a case of simply picking it up, but having to literally scrape it from the tarmac. I forced myself not to gag as the homeowner appeared in the window and both he and Arthur stood and watched me. I swear there’s something very wrong with this aspect of the man–dog relationship. If aliens ever did land on earth, who would they think was in charge? Not the humans, that’s for sure.

I carried on scraping . . . there, I thought I’d got it all . . . I shone my iPhone torch on the drive to check. See, Mr Owner of the Big Grown-Up House. I might feel like a fuck-up, but I am a very responsible person! I felt a slight sense of triumph.

Followed by a sickening horror as the beam of light swung from the tarmac onto the poo bag.

Oh my God. It had ripped! My fingers had gone through it! It was all over one of the glittery cashmere gloves that I'd got for Christmas! I yanked it off. Fuck! *Fuck!* FUCK!

I could have cried. Literally lain down and wept. It did actually cross my mind. I could imagine the owner calling through to his wife in the kitchen, 'Darling, there's a strange woman lying on our driveway covered in dog poo and weeping hysterically. I can't quite hear through the double glazing but I think she's saying something about how it's her birthday. Perhaps we should call the police. She's going to scare the children.'

Only, Arthur had other ideas. Spotting a squirrel, he let out a howl and took off, taking me with him as he charged down the pavement while I hung on for dear life. He didn't catch it, of course. It disappeared up a tree and Arthur stood at the bottom, barking his head off. Poor Arthur, I did feel a bit sorry for him. You'd think he would have learned by now. Then again, how many years did it take for me to learn that when a man disappears by not returning your call, barking my head off by sending him endless texts wasn't going to work either.

Which is kind of the same thing. Sort of.

We turned to head home, and I was already mentally running the bath and getting into bed with my iPhone to scroll through photos of sunsets and what everyone had eaten for dinner, when I caught a waft of fish and chips coming from a pub on the corner. Well, it was my birthday.

Inside there looked to be a few locals enjoying a quiet drink. I tied Arthur to a table leg in the corner while I went to wash my hands and order a glass of wine and fish and chips at the

bar. When I reappeared five minutes later, I half expected him to have dragged the table across the pub. Instead he was sitting there obediently, having his ears scratched by a small boy in a beanie.

‘He likes that,’ I smiled.

The boy looked up, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t. ‘Oh, is he your dog?’

I was about to say no, that he belonged to my landlord, when something changed my mind. ‘Yes, he’s my dog.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Arthur.’

The little boy grinned wider, revealing a missing tooth. ‘Like King Arthur?’

‘Exactly.’ I nodded, glancing at Arthur, who was sitting there looking quite regal while having his head stroked. It wasn’t a bad prefix considering who seemed to be in charge around here; it certainly wasn’t me. ‘King Arthur.’

The little boy’s eyes lit up and he buried his hands deep into Arthur’s fur. ‘I want a dog but Mummy won’t let me. She says I can only have a hamster.’

‘Well, hamsters can be fun.’

He looked unconvinced. ‘But it’s not like King Arthur,’ he replied.

‘No, it’s not,’ I admitted.

‘Oliver, there you are!’

A male voice caused us both to look up.

‘I wondered where you’d got to—’

A man appeared from the other side of the pub, looking like he’d just come in from outside. Wearing a down jacket, a thick scarf and gloves, he had short dark hair and was the spitting image of Oliver. So this must be his dad.

Oliver reached for his sleeve excitedly. ‘Guess what his name is! It’s King Arthur. Like in the movie we saw!’

‘He’s not bothering you, is he?’

‘No, no . . . not at all.’

He had really nice eyes. Pale blue, the colour of faded denim.

‘That’s good,’ he smiled, then winked at his son. ‘Come on, we’re late.’

He was attractive, in a dad kind of way.

‘Scratch his ears! He loves it!’

He dutifully squatted down, took off one of his gloves and scratched Arthur’s ears. Arthur was loving the attention. ‘Now, do you think he’ll scratch mine,’ he said with a straight face, tilting his head sideways and sending Oliver into fits of giggles.

‘OK, come on you, we really must go or your mum will kill me. She’s waiting for us at the cinema.’

‘Bye, King Arthur . . . bye.’ Oliver waved to us both.

‘Bye.’ I waved back. ‘Enjoy the movie.’

‘Thanks.’ His dad smiled and took his son’s hand.

I watched them walk out of the pub together, and for a moment I couldn’t help wishing I was the lucky woman waiting at the cinema. Not just because they looked so cute, father and son, hand in hand. But because I couldn’t help noticing how he filled out those jeans—

Whoa, Nell!

It took me by surprise. This was the first man I’d noticed since The American Fiancé, never mind found attractive. Followed by resignation that he was someone’s husband, which sadly did *not* take me by surprise because at my age all the good ones are taken.

But somewhere, deep inside this wounded soul of mine, it also ignited a little flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t over for me yet.

I'm grateful for:

1. *My wine, which was so delicious I had to order two more glasses.*
2. *Arthur knowing his way home.*
3. *Ibuprofen.*
4. *The flashback from last night, otherwise I would not have just remembered that in all the mayhem of shit-gate I left behind the offending poo bag and glove, and will have to go back and retrieve them while leaving a grovelling apology.*
5. *The fact there are not 'Wanted' posters of me up in the village already.**

* But just in case, I will wear a hat.