

Grace After Henry

Grace sees her boyfriend Henry everywhere. At the supermarket, on the street, at the graveyard.

Only Henry is dead. He died two months earlier, leaving a huge hole in Grace's life and in her heart. But then Henry turns up to fix the boiler one evening, and Grace can't decide if she's hallucinating or has suddenly developed psychic powers. Grace isn't going mad - the man in front of her is not Henry at all, but someone else who looks uncannily like him. The hole in Grace's heart grows ever larger.

Grace becomes captivated by this stranger, Andy - to her, he is Henry, and yet he is not. Reminded of everything she once had, can Grace recreate that lost love with Andy, resurrecting Henry in the process, or does loving Andy mean letting go of Henry?

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Eithne Shortall



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Grace took out her notebook and began to tut. She made a big deal of dragging a pen from her jeans pocket and clicking it into action.

‘Damp,’ she mumbled, ostensibly to herself but purposely loud enough to be heard by the two couples also inspecting this bathroom that was moonlighting as a time capsule and ode to bad taste. Grace glanced up from the avocado-coloured toilet. She tutted again. ‘Weak gable wall.’

In the mirror above the sink, she watched the reflections of her fellow house hunters. One couple was inspecting the patch of ceiling Grace had just spent a good two minutes frowning at, and the woman in the other pair was making panicked eyes at her partner although he didn’t pick up on this because he was too busy inspecting the boiler.

‘That’ll have to be replaced,’ said Grace, standing beside him, peering into the cupboard. ‘Hasn’t been serviced since The Beatles called it a day, at least that’s what I heard the estate agent say.’

Grace, who hadn’t a clue about boilers or whether bathrooms even had gable walls, gave him a sympathetic

smile and sauntered out of the 1970s lavatory and into the 1970s kitchen.

It probably wasn't necessary to still be scaring off the competition. Grace and Henry had gone sale agreed on an end-of-terrace house on Aberdeen Street the previous week. It was right beside the Phoenix Park, which ticked more than enough boxes for Henry, and while the second bedroom was small it had the kind of spacious, fitted kitchen that reminded Grace why she had wanted to be a chef. They were both mad about it. But they'd had deals fall through before. And while Henry wanted to hold out for Aberdeen Street – he was convinced the Phoenix Park house was meant to be – Grace knew the shrewd move was to keep looking. Just in case.

She checked her phone. 5.45pm and no messages. He had fifteen minutes to get here.

Henry was the master of cutting it fine. Grace, on the other hand, had been standing under the For Sale sign at this East Wall terrace at 5.20pm, ten whole minutes before the estate agent was due to arrive. Though she drew the line at queuing. She knew from experience that, as soon as the door opened, everyone was going to charge in anyway.

An older couple stepped out of the kitchen as she was on her way in. Grace caught the wife's eye. *Riddled*, was what she hoped her gaze said. *You'd buy this dump on a Monday, and it'd have fallen in on you by Tuesday.*

Actually, this house wasn't that bad. Despite its psychedelic décor and a smaller kitchen than Grace might have liked, it had a converted attic and no real signs of damp.

It was worth keeping their options open.

‘Don’t think like that,’ Henry had groaned from under the duvet that morning, trying to wrangle his way out of going to yet another viewing. ‘Ten months we’ve been looking. Haven’t we served our time? We’ve found our house. I don’t even want to consider another one.’

‘Well neither do I but reality’ –

‘Reality,’ Henry scoffed, making a grab for Grace’s bare leg as she sidestepped him again. ‘We might jinx it by looking elsewhere. Aberdeen Street is going to work out, I’m telling you. I can feel it.’

Grace, standing half-dressed on the pile of newspapers that continually carpeted Henry’s side of the bed, extracted the toothbrush from her mouth. ‘Let me guess, you’re going to tell me it’s fate.’

‘Exactly. And I feel another part of our destiny involves going to see the original Mad Max, which is having a one-off screening at the Savoy this evening.’

‘Do you know how often house sales fall through, Henry?’

‘No.’ He pushed the duvet down to his midriff and grinned at her. ‘But I bet you do.’

‘One in four. And it’s most common with first time buyers. What if we don’t get Aberdeen Street?’

‘Aber-*dream* Street.’

Now it was Grace’s turn to smile. ‘I love it too, but we can’t put all our eggs in one basket. Until we have the keys in our hands, we have to keep looking.’

‘You’re right, you are. I’ll be there before the viewing is over,’ he said, finally making a success grab for her leg and

pulling her onto the bed. 'Why don't you put all your eggs in this basket?'

'That doesn't even make any sense.' Grace held her brush aloft so as not to get toothpaste on the duvet but she allowed herself to be pulled back under it.

'Jesus, Grace! You're so cold! You're bloody freezing.'

'Of course I'm freezing. I've been in our bathroom.'

'When we have a bathroom of our own, it'll have real ventilation, not just a hole in the wall. And we'll have a toilet cistern that refills. . . *by itself*.'

'The dream,' she deadpanned, before his arm reached up from below the blanket and caught her off guard. 'Hey! Give me that back. Don't put that in your – Gross! You absolute sicko, Henry Walsh. Get your own feckin' toothbrush!'

Grace pushed the flower power curtains aside and looked out the window of the front bedroom of the East Wall mid-terrace. 5.52pm. House hunters were starting to leave, some crossed the road for a better look at the roof and drainage while others headed straight for their cars. It was threatening to rain, and still no sign of Henry's bike.

He would probably arrive just as the last lingering viewers were being herded out of the property, ruffling his helmet hair and somehow convincing the estate agent to stick around for an extra few minutes while he did a quick tour of the place. Grace envied how easily he could do that. He charmed his way into things all the time and it came so naturally he didn't even realise he was doing it. Everyone liked Henry. He exuded self-assuredness and

people wanted to be around him. And Grace was happy, proud even, that he always wanted to be around her.

She stepped away from the window. When they moved into their own home, she would tell him how much she loved him every day. She stuck the notebook under her arm and continued into the second bedroom and then up to the converted attic. From the skylight she could see the River Liffey, flanked by lorries heading to and from the docks. It had started to rain.

‘That’s it, folks! Time to wrap it up!’

Grace peered down the attic stairs to see the young estate agent standing at the bottom of them. She checked her phone again. 5.59. Where was he?

Out in the front garden, Grace called him but it went straight to voicemail. *This is Henry Walsh, leave a message.* No sign of his bike from either end of the street. The last few stragglers streamed out into the rain and the estate agent shut the door behind them. Grace pushed down her hood.

‘I’m waiting on my boyfriend, he’s just running a little late.’

‘Sorry,’ said the agent, hunching forward as he pulled an umbrella from his bag. ‘We’re showing it again on Saturday.’

Grace nodded and followed him out of the garden. He hopped into his car and she sat on the front wall, damp seeping through the arse of her trousers and water dripping from the rim of her raincoat hood.

For feck sake, Henry! Where are you?

The rain got heavier. She pulled her hood tighter and turned her mobile phone over in her hands. 6.07. She let out

a frustrated sigh. She could feel the water on her shoulders, a slight trickle running down her arm. Grace repositioned her face to express maximum irritation. She intended to make Henry feel guilty. She was soaked. He'd better have a grovelling apology ready to go. He'd want to be arriving here with a good excuse. Even if he knew he wouldn't make it on time, he could have called. He could have –

A crack from above like a whip ripping the sky open. The grey clouds grew darker and the rain continued to pour. Grace's stomach dropped. She was filled with the most awful certainty that something was wrong.

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'Feck it!'

The cyclist at the bike rail beside him looked up.

'Forgot something,' Henry told the stranger, before redoing his bike lock and jogging back to his office building. He bounded up the steps, taking them two at a time, using the handrail to propel himself onward.

'Forget something else?'

'Helmet. She'll kill me if I'm not wearing it.'

Henry went to the cloakroom, grabbed the green armour from his cubbyhole and waved it at the receptionist. 'Last time I'll be back, I swear.'

'Until tomorrow anyway,' she called after him. 'Best of luck with the house!'

But Henry was already on the staircase, winding the scarf tighter around his neck as he hotfooted it down the steps.

He was dressed in a near homage to Grace. The bright red scarf she'd knit him, and which he adored, and the helmet she insisted he start wearing. If he died, or suffered a terrible brain injury, what about her? It wasn't just about him anymore.

Henry had never felt so half of something as the day he bought that helmet. It was scary to love someone so much that the end of one life could mean the end of two. He had never found the words to describe how much he loved Grace but he tried to show it in his actions; in being her biggest champion, in wearing a helmet like others wore a ring, in not being late for this house viewing.

He checked his watch. 5.35pm. Okay. If he put his pedal to the metal and didn't hit any red lights he would make it for 5.50. He only needed ten minutes to look around. Less, usually. And unless this house was significantly better than the shamelessly wide-angled photographs online suggested, his heart was still set on Aberdeen Street.

Henry unlocked his bike for the second time and stuffed A Christmas Carol into his bag. That was what he had gone back to the office for the first time. He and Grace were reading it. Again. Even though it was February. Henry had brought it to work for a project they were designing – the book was just the right size for a mock-up – but he needed to have it back before bedtime. It was his turn to read tonight. Though she could whistle for it if she thought he was doing the voices.

Henry pushed off, pulling the scarf into position again. The sky was grey but he reckoned he could make it to East

Wall before the heavens opened. He got stuck behind a group of tourists cycling two abreast down Dame Street and had to dismount his bike because of roadworks at College Green. The clock at O'Connell Bridge said 5.44. Shit. He'd take the quays. Less traffic lights and less cyclists. He looked right, left, threw the boisterous scarf over his shoulder once more and pushed right in unison with an articulated truck.

The quays were always jammed with industrial vehicles at this hour but at least they were moving, their massive wheels turning, the bolts the size of Henry's head. The cycle lane was empty. He picked up speed, recalculating his arrival time. 5.55, probably. 5.53, if he stepped on it. It didn't really matter; he just had to get there. He pushed down harder, feeling the strain in his thighs. If Henry made Grace a promise, he kept it. He loved her. Five years together and he hadn't grown tired of this same startling realisation that boomed outwards from his chest, reverberating in every part of him. He *fucking* loved her! He'd tell her when he got there. He was always telling her, but he'd tell her again. He grinned to himself. They'd get that Aberdeen Street house and properly, really properly, begin their life together. His heart swelled, driving him forward, faster. He loved this feeling; he was cycling towards her.

A splash on his wrist, Henry looked up. He didn't feel his scarf coming loose, didn't register the pull around his neck as the wind that had been holding it in the air finally dropped and it looped its way through the spokes. A second splash, and another. In the spokes, wrapping round and round, and now the breaks. A sudden halt. Fuck.

Rain keeping time on his handlebars as they fell to the right. Wheels skidding, his feet down to balance but too late, too fast, too determined not to be late for Grace. Grace. Bike toppled, big wheel, as big as him, bolt the size of his head. The suction. Suck! And under. Oh god Grace. Crunch, crun – Black.

All gone. In the flutter of an eye. Her eyes. Grace.

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SEVERAL WEEKS LATER

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ONE



There were moments of lucidity – the sound of Dad abruptly starting up the vacuum cleaner and Mam screaming that hoovering disturbed the moths – but most of the first few weeks passed in a fugue. I was constantly exhausted. I didn't leave the bed, never mind my parents' house, if I could help it. My social circle consisted of Mam, Dad, occasional visits from Aoife and the three other mourners I met every time I went to visit Henry's grave.

The day I came to, and regained some sort of awareness, my parents were jumping around their living room like Native Americans celebrating the arrival of rain. Everyone else's life had continued, all but mine and Henry's. Time kept passing, the sun kept rising and, as sure as spring follows winter, the moths had returned.

'I got him! I got the little bugger.'

Dad froze where he stood, right in the middle of the living room – knee bent, hands raised; an impressive yoga crane for a man with a bad lower back – and Mam, from her position on the sofa, squinted at the space above the television, the same bit of middle distance that was entrancing Dad.

Neither spoke. It was, I knew because the Late Late Show had just come on the telly, 9.35 on a Friday night.

‘You did not get him Arthur, look. Look! There he is now. Looklooklooklook! Quickquickquickquick!’ Mam leapt to her feet, adopting the McDonnell family’s preferred stance when it came to the extermination of moths. ‘There he is!’

‘Where?’

‘There.’

‘Where?’

‘Theretheretherethere!’

‘I see him I see him. The fecker! I’ve got you now my little friend.’

‘It’s the feckin’ heat.’ Mam grabbed the two magazines from Dad’s armchair and held a rolled up Heat in her left hand and House & Home in her right. ‘The mild winter and all the feckin’ central heating. I told you we didn’t need the radiators on in March, Arthur. I don’t see why you couldn’t just use the tumble drier to dry the clothes. You may as well roll out the welcome mat. They thrive in temperatures above 22 degrees.’ This was the fourth consecutive year our house had been overrun by moths and my mother, who had reactivated her library membership to read up on them, had found her Mastermind subject.

‘Well excuse me, Sarah,’ said Dad, momentarily distracted from the assassination by this slight on his housekeeping skills. Since retiring, Dad had developed two passions: domesticity and celebrity gossip. The week he stopped being a driving instructor, he watched the entirety of Lindsay Lohan’s trial live on TMZ. And he was so worried about her

that he took to cleaning to distract himself. 'If you want to live in a home where you have to wear your winter coat just to go to the bathroom. . .'

'There's nowhere else I can wear it, now they've eaten two big feckin' holes in the arse of it!'

'And whose fault is that?! If you'd just hang it back, like I showed you, under the plastic cover, which I got special from the dry cleaners, but you just throw it wherever you feel –'

'I see him! Arthur! There!'

'Shush!' admonished Dad, his head cocked like Patch used to before he went deaf and forgot he had ears.

'They can't hear us, Arthur.' Mam rolled her eyes, trying to coax me into the conversation. But I was still trying to get my bearings.

I had relinquished autonomy the moment I arrived back at our flat, drenched with rain and dread, to find two police officers at the front door. 'Grace McDonnell?' And I'd known then, not from what they said but how they stood, with their uniform caps in hand, as if they were already at the funeral. It was amazing how long you could get away with ignoring everything when you didn't care about the outcome of anything. Emerging from that apathy in my parents' house was like coming to in a madhouse.

'Shush!' Dad adjusted his glasses, his eyes flickering from the middle distance above the telly to the middle distance above my head. 'I need to concentrate.'

Mam sent her eyes sky-wards again. She held her own spectacles up to her face.

'There! Arthur, behind you!'

‘He’s not, he is! He’s – sorry love.’ Dad clambered into my chair, crushing the unopened book that lay on the armrest.

‘Get him Arthur. Go on, get him! Get the bastard.’

‘Mam!’

‘Just checking you were still with us, pet.’

‘And. . . smack!’ Dad peeled his hand off the mint green wallpaper and presented his palm victoriously. ‘Mess with the McDonnells and you! Get! Squashed!’

And they both started shrieking, dancing their tribal dance around the rug once again. It was always the strangest things that reminded me how besotted my parents were with each other. They worked so hard to build this life, and they deserved these years to enjoy it together.

That was the point where I stood, something they weren’t used to seeing me do without coaxing, and declared that it was time I moved on. Aberdeen Street was ready; I’d signed the last papers and the keys were mine to collect when I wanted. Henry’s parents had insisted I follow through on the purchase. They didn’t want the deposit money and his life insurance would help me through the first year of mortgage payments.

Mam said it was too soon. Dad said I’d be missed and that my eyesight was a vital asset in the war against larvae. But I had to go. Every time I looked at them I wanted to apologise for the new lines on their faces.

Within a week, we had moved my stuff into the end-of-terrace on Aberdeen Street that I kept referring to as ‘our house’. The only unpacked bag was the plastic one stuffed with coats and scarves that had got caught on the spikes of

the gate as Dad carried it in. It burst all over the hallway and, ten days on, I still hadn't found the energy to pick them up.

I thought I heard Henry the first night I was in this house. Thinking I saw him was nothing new, every time I went outside I was convinced I saw him somewhere, but that was the first time I'd heard his voice. I was in the back garden, checking the door that led from the shed to the laneway was locked. I pulled at the iron lock to ensure it was solid, and this shot of laughter rang out. I recoiled from the lock as if it burnt my hand. I didn't move another inch. I swear to god it was Henry's laugh.

My heart pounded in my chest and I felt a wave of nausea but I ignored it. I stood, still as a statue, waiting for the sound that would not be repeated. I remained like that until I started to shiver, then reluctantly I went back inside.

There were days when my only interaction was with the man in the corner shop with the Chinese-Dublin accent who called himself Pat but whose real name was Xin. I bought bread and cheese from him and he sometimes made observations but never asked questions.

'You're like a vampire,' he said, handing over the brie and baguette.

'Because I'm pale?'

'Because you only come out at night.'

But mostly I just sat on the floor in the hallway beside the mound of coats and watched as my phone flashed beside me. I'd been ignoring my mother's calls for three days now. All she wanted was for me to say, 'yes, doing much better this evening'. And I couldn't. I considered lying back down on

the pile of duffel and denim and wool. There was no end to how much I could sleep.

The phone stopped ringing and I waited for the single ‘ping’. The screen flashed again: You Have Nine New Voicemails. She only wanted to help, like Dad when he’d offered to buy me a coat rail. Putting into action something he couldn’t put into words. Just like Henry. The white glow faded and the hallway returned to dark. There was no bulb in the light fixture above me and I liked it like that. It reminded me of Ebenezer Scrooge roaming around his home in the dark, too stingy to pay for lamps.

Almost all of what Henry was carrying had been obliterated when the wheel of the articulated lorry returning to Dublin Port after a sugar delivery had rolled over him. All that had come back to me was his oil-stained backpack and a bizarrely pristine copy of *A Christmas Carol*. We read to each other most nights and we’d been reading that one when he died. Henry was atrocious at voices but I made him do them anyway. His Bob Cratchit had me rolling around the bed laughing. We read *A Christmas Carol* every year, but never at Christmas. Too predictable.

Sitting with my back to the wall and my knees pulled into me, I opened the book to the relevant passage. I angled the page towards the living room so I might have enough light to make out the words. ‘Darkness is cheap and Scrooge liked it,’ I read aloud to no one, the sound of my own voice making me jump. ‘Before he shut his heavy door, he walked through his rooms to see that all was right. He had just enough recollection of the face to desire to do that.’

Beyond the front door, people were moving; coming home from work, going to the shop, heading out for a run in the park. And I stayed in the hallway. Every other room was filled with bags and boxes; throes and cushions in the sitting room, clothes in our bedroom, books in the study, and mountains of crockery and saucepans in the kitchen. I couldn't bring myself to unpack any of them. I couldn't be in the same room as them. So I stayed where I was, in the darkness where Henry had left me.

I would have given anything to have him back; this house, everything in it, a limb, two limbs, my sense of taste. I would have cut off the last two decades of my life. I would have watched a stranger die. I would have watched my parents die. I dug my nails into my arm until the dents didn't immediately disappear. The longing and aching were joined by a fresh wave of guilt. I closed my eyes until the nausea passed. But I had started down this path and I couldn't stop. Even when I opened them I saw it.

I saw him hurrying along on his bike, worried that I would be cross with him for being late, and that stupid scarf that I had knit that he never wanted coming undone. I saw the red wool looping into the spokes of his wheel, going round and round until it pulled him under the truck. I heard a decisive crunch as his bones were turned to dust and the squelch like a welly coming away from marsh as his insides were flattened. But mainly I saw the red, spinning round and round, over and over, an indistinguishable mix of scarf and blood and eviscerated organs.

'Why didn't you look where you were going?'

The responding silence echoed around the hallway and throbbed in my ears.

‘Why didn’t you slow down? Why couldn’t you just do that?’

I remembered the last time I saw him; he was heading out the door of our flat, his big smiling head asking what the weather was supposed to be like and me saying it’d be windy and— No. No. No. No. I couldn’t finish that thought.

‘Henry! I’m talking to you. H-’ I choked on his name. I missed his arms and his smell and I missed him. It filled me with rage how he never responded and that made my throat throb harder. ‘I’m sorry, okay?’

‘Henry.’

It was not a statement, but a plea. I winced at the desperation in my voice.

‘I said I’m sorry.’

But there was only the confirmation of night. The buzz and click and finally light as the streetlamp at the end of Aberdeen Street illuminated. My phone flashed again and I slid it away. I allowed my body to slump to the side, and though I was sobbing into the hood of a quilted jacket, sleep took no time. I was exhausted. I was gone before the ‘ping’ of my mother’s tenth voicemail.

TWO

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'Grace likes telling this story because she likes telling everyone what a dope I was.'

'Not a dope. More. . . cringe worthy.'

'Great. Much better.'

'We knew each other when we were teenagers. Henry lived in the same estate as a girl I went to school with and I'd met him at house parties. We even kissed once actually, during a game of truth and dare, although Henry complained that I was the one who'd been given the dare so why did he have to suffer.'

'I did not use the word "suffer".'

'But then Christmas Eve, a few years ago, we were both in my local. The Back Bar. Henry goes there every Christmas Eve but I'm usually in my granny's. Only she was in England that year, staying with my uncle. So I go to the pub with Aoife.'

'You met Aoife at Grace's birthday.'

'Really dark hair, yeah, dead straight. That's her. She gets it from her mother's side. So anyway, me and Aoife go into the Back Bar and the place is rammed. But I see Henry

at the bar. Half a foot taller than everyone else. And he's in a big group with Claire Maguire, the girl from school. She was the one who had all the house parties when we were teenagers. So anyway I go over and me and Aoife are going on about how we haven't seen Claire in so long and what's she up to now, but really I've got one eye on Henry the whole time. And I can tell he's looking at me.'

'I was just keeping an eye out for my pint.'

'And this goes on for a while. Claire's not introducing us and I can't see how I'm going to get talking to him and the barman is getting ready to ring the bell for last orders so I start to panic. And Aoife can see I'm panicking even though I haven't had a chance to say anything to her but she knows I liked Henry all those years ago.'

'Best kiss of her adolescence.'

'Slim pickings in the Dublin suburbs more like. Anyway, Aoife suddenly goes: "Johnny Connors! Is that you? Oh my god, Johnny Connors." And Henry's like, "Eh, no. Not me".'

'I do not talk like that.'

'And Aoife says, "Are you sure?" Like, are you sure you are who you are?! She was working off the cuff. Anyway, he says "no, wrong guy".'

'You're making me sound like Father Stone.'

'Who?'

'From Father Ted. The boring priest.'

'Oh yeah. Ha. You do sound a bit like him actually. Anyway, then Aoife goes, "Grace. Is this guy not the cut of Johnny Connors?" And I'm thinking, "who the fuck is Johnny Connors?" But anyway I just go, "no, that's Henry

Walsh". But I shouldn't have remembered his surname. It had been years.'

'Once kissed by Henry Walsh, a girl never forgets.'

'I'd clearly been Facebook stalking him. I think you were pretty flattered, Henry, some girl knew your name, made you feel like a big man. Big man in the Back Bar.'

'So, anyway, there you have it; that's how we met.'

'Hold your horses there Johnny Connors. That's not the whole story.'

'Yes, it is. We've hogged enough conversation time. Let the people eat.'

'So we get talking anyway but the pub is closing and Henry says he'll walk me home...'

'Are they our main courses?'

'...Which was about three minutes down the road but grand, I say, yeah, great thanks. We reach the bottom of my street and Henry takes my number and it's clear we're supposed to kiss but I don't want to cause I hate feeling like I'm in a film, like I'm just acting out the script, so I start backing up the street towards my house, saying, "see ya round", and Henry's there going, "ehhh. . ."'

'I do not sound like that.'

'...clearly trying to think of something to say, so I walk slower and then just as I'm about to turn into my garden, he go – he – he goes –'

'Look at her. The supposed love of my life. Laughing so hard she can't get the words out.'

'He go – sorry, hang on, give me a sec. . . Woo! Composure. Okay. I'm turning into my garden and he

shouts, in his big Father Stone voice. . .

'A new detail. Great.'

'He shouts. . .'

'Here we go.'

'Let's do lunch!'

'You're almost on the floor, Grace. The waiter's going to think you've choked on something.'

'Let's do lunch?! What? Who says that?'

'It's really not that funny.'

'Did you have your Filofax on you that night or were you going to put the appointment in when you got home?'

'Look how much joy she gets from humiliating me. You alright there, Grace? Can you breathe?'

'Let's do lunch! Oh god, it's so good. There I was thinking we were in some cheesy romance film, but apparently Henry thought we were in Wall Street!'

'Her love doth overflow-eth.'

'Did you schedule lunch meetings with all the girls back then, or was it just me?'

'Alright, honey. Just breathe. You're going to pull a muscle.'