

Our Stop

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avon.

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*For anyone who, like me, chooses to believe
(despite all the evidence to the contrary)*

1

Nadia

‘Shit. Shit, shit, shit.’

Nadia Fielding launched down the escalator of the tube station, her new sandals flapping with force underfoot. If people didn’t move out of her way because of the swearing, surely they would for the massive *thwack* she made each time a sole hit the step. She cursed ever having swiped up on the Instagram link, and she cursed the blogger who had made the black leather monstrosities look chic – and comfortable – enough to buy. They were giving her a blister already. *Fuck you, @whiskyandwhimsies*, Nadia thought to herself. *I hope your next sponsored trip to the Amalfi Coast falls through.*

Coffee held precariously in her hand, bag slipping from her shoulder, sunglasses beginning to slide off the top of her head, Nadia was a mess – but she’d be damned if she wasn’t getting the 7.30. Today was the first day of The New Routine to Change Her Life, and The New Routine to Change Her Life meant catching the train on time.

She struggled with this. Midnight bedtimes after a night out with Emma or Gaby (she was healing a dented heart! Wine is so delicious!) and a general tendency towards being more of a night owl than an early riser (to think she knew people who did Super Spin before work!) both conspired to intensify Nadia's love affair with the snooze button. She only accomplished being on time for work about once a week, normally on a Monday. She thanked god she lived alone in a flat that technically her mother owned but that meant she didn't need roommates – no matter what time she got up, at least there was never a queue for the bathroom.

Monday was a perpetual Fresh Start – but often by the time Nadia put a Netflix series on that night, little had changed. She was always very conscientious between getting up and just before lunch, though. It was Monday afternoons that undid her. It couldn't be helped. The working week was just so agonizingly long, and she spent her whole life trying to catch up with herself. She was sick of being exhausted. A viral BuzzFeed article had called it 'Millennial Burnout'. But, that's not to say Nadia couldn't achieve big things when she put her mind to it – recently she'd polished off all seven seasons of *The Good Wife* in little under three weeks. Unfortunately, however, there was no way to leverage her binge-watching-of-American-lawyers-in-impossibly-tight-skirts-with-bizarrely-sassy-retorts-to-chauvinism skill into a salaried position. And so, life went on in a muddle. Well, until today. Today was the first day of the rest of her life.

Nadia's New Routine to Change Her Life wasn't to be confused with a Fresh Start, because obviously The New Routine to Change Her Life would not fail, like previous attempts. This time it would be different. *She* would be different. She'd become the woman one step *ahead* of herself.

The sort of woman who meal-prepped for the week in matching Tupperware, who didn't have to renew her passport at exorbitant cost the week before a holiday but instead recognized the expiration date with a three-month lead time and didn't get frustrated at the confusing form at the Post Office. She was to become the kind of woman who had comprehensive life insurance and a closet full of clothes already ironed, instead of crisis-steaming wrinkled & Other Stories dresses five minutes before she had to run for the bus. Nadia would become, when her new plan became her new reality, a beacon of Goop-like organization and zen. More *Namaste* than *Nama-stay-in-bed*. She'd be the Gwyneth Paltrow of Stamford Hill, with slightly wonkier teeth.

'Excuse me! Sorry!' she screeched, to nobody in particular and everyone all at once, as she approached the platform at speed. She normally hated the people that shoved her out of the way in tube stations and at bus stops, as if they were the only folks with anywhere important to be. On more than one occasion she'd shouted after an elbow-barger, 'EXCUSE YOU!' in pointed frustration. But today, this morning, *she* was the selfish oaf pushing through the commuting crowds, and she didn't have time to be embarrassed about it. The new Nadia was perhaps a little ruder than her old self, but goddamnit she was also more punctual. (She suddenly had an echo of the shrill soprano of her GCSE English teacher, who would intone, 'To be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late . . . and to be late is absolutely unacceptable!')

'Wait! No!' she squealed. Nadia was four quick steps away from the train, but at the speed she was hurtling was about to go face-first into closed doors unless somebody defied Transport for London's rules and held them open.

‘Waitwaitwaitwaitwait!’ Her voice reached a pitch only dolphins could hear. As if in slow motion, a hand reached out and pinned the door back, meaning that Nadia could stumble aboard just as her knock-off Ray-Bans hit her face and she was temporarily blinded by their darkness. The doors snapped shut behind her. She’d made it. Just.

With a bit of practice, Nadia thought, suddenly smug, muttering a thank you and grabbing the only free seat to sit and slurp at her coffee, *I might be able to nail this new routine*. It had taken cajoling and effort, but so far, in the whole hour and half she’d been up, she was impressed to reflect that she’d stuck to her self-imposed rules. Ninety minutes on plan was better than ninety minutes off-plan, after all.

The New Routine to Change Her Life comprised several things besides making sure she was on the platform at exactly 7.30 a.m., to catch the tube from Angel to London Bridge. The other rules included:

- AT LEAST seven hours of sleep a night, meaning bed at 11 p.m. LATEST – and that meant lights out and eyes closed at 11 p.m., not getting to bed at 11 p.m. and spending three hours doggedly refreshing the holy trifecta of Instagram, Twitter and email and then wondering why it was so difficult to get up when the alarm went off the next day, whilst also fuelling the suspicion that everyone else’s life was far easier and more beautiful than hers.
- Up at 6 a.m., to meditate for fifteen minutes, then lighting a soy-wax scented candle as she got ready for work with calmness and serenity, in the manner of Oprah, or perhaps the Duchess of Sussex.

- Swapping a station-bought, triple-shot, extra-large cappuccino that Nadia was sure gave her spots – she’d seen the trailer for a documentary about the hormones in milk – to make a bulletproof coffee in a reusable cup for the commute. She had heard about bulletproof coffees via a Hollywood star who documented her life and workouts on Instagram in real time and who added unsalted butter to her morning espresso to regulate her energy levels and poop schedule. (‘That’s like making a green smoothie with vanilla ice cream,’ her mother had suggested in an email, which Nadia had, regretfully, no scientific retort for. ‘At least I’m doing it in an environmentally friendly KeepCup,’ she’d settled on, wondering if, actually, her mother was right.)
- Keeping faith in romance: just because her ex Awful Ben was, indeed, awful, it didn’t mean she had to think all men were, and it was important to keep believing in love.

Nadia also planned on getting to the office before everyone else each morning. She worked in artificial intelligence, developing technology that could think for itself and replace basic human activities like stacking shelves and labelling boxes, with a view to eventually making the warehouse arm of her company totally AI-run. She intended to always get a head start on reviewing the previous day’s prototype developments, before the inevitable meetings about meetings began, interrupting her every six to nine minutes and destroying her concentration until she wanted to scream or cry, depending on where in her menstrual cycle she was.

Her morning’s self-satisfaction didn’t last long, though.

The train stopped in a sudden, jerky movement, and hot brown liquid hurled itself from the lip of her KeepCup, soaking into the hem of her light-blue dress and through to her thighs.

‘Shit,’ she said again, as if she, a woman in charge of a team of six, earning £38,000 a year and with two degrees, didn’t know any other words.

Her best friend Emma called Nadia’s coffee addiction an attitude adjustment in a cup. She needed caffeine to function as a human. Groaning outwardly, pouting at the blemish she’d have to wear on herself all day now, she chastised herself for not being more sophisticated – she’d never seen Meghan bloody Markle covered in her breakfast.

Nadia pulled out her phone and texted her best friend Emma, wanting a bit of Monday-morning cheerleading.

Morning! Do you want to go see that new Bradley Cooper film this week? I need something in the diary to be excited about . . .

She sat and waited for her friend’s reply. It was hot on the train, even this early, and a tiny bead of sweat had formed at the nape of her neck. She could smell BO, and instantly worried it was coming from her.

Nadia tried to surreptitiously turn her head and pretend-cough, bringing her shoulder up to her mouth and her nostrils closer to her armpits. She smelled of antiperspirant. She’d read about the link between deodorant and breast cancer and tried using a crystal as a natural alternative for three weeks a few summers ago, but Emma had pulled her aside and told her in no uncertain terms that it was ineffective. Today, she was 100 per cent aluminium – and sweat-free – in cucumber and green tea Dove.

Relieved, she looked around for the culprit, clocking a group of tourists arguing over a map, a nanny with three

blonde children, and a cute man reading a paper by the doors who didn't look unlike the model in the new John Lewis adverts. Her gaze finally landed on the damp patches under the armpits of the guy stood right in front of her, his crotch almost in her eye. Gross. The morning commute was like being on Noah's Ark – wild animals cooped up, unnaturally close, a smorgasbord of odours akin to Saturday afternoon in Sports Direct.

She waited for her stop, staring idly around the carriage, trying not to inhale. She glanced lazily back at the man by the doors – the one with the newspaper. *Just my type*, she couldn't help but think, enjoying the way his tailored trousers danced close enough to his thighs to make her cheeks blush. Her phone buzzed. She pulled her gaze away to look at Emma's text, and forgot about him.

2

Daniel

Daniel Weissman couldn't believe it. As they'd pulled up at Angel she'd skidded around the corner and he'd held his breath as he'd held the door, like a Taylor Swift lyric about an innocuous beginning and a happy ending and love that was always meant to be. Not that Daniel meant to sound soft that way. He just got weird and jittery and soppy when he thought about her. She had that effect on him. Daniel found it hard not to let his imagination get carried away.

He tried to catch sight of her from his position by the doors – she'd snaked around to the middle of the carriage. He could just about make out the top of her head. She always had hair that was messy, but not like she didn't care about herself. It was messy like she'd just come from a big adventure, or the beach. It probably had a name, but Daniel didn't know it. He just knew that she was very much his type. It was so embarrassing, but in the sponsorship advert in between every ad break for *The Lust Villa*, there was a girl

who looked just like her, and if Daniel hadn't seen her in a while even that – a bloody advert! – could make him nostalgic and thoughtful. It was shameful, really.

The Lust Villa was Daniel's summer reality TV fix, full of romance and seduction and laughing. Daniel acted like it bugged him that the TV had to be on at 9 p.m. every evening for the show, but he was always in the living room at 8.58 p.m., as if by accident, just settling down to his cup of tea in the big armchair with the best view of the widescreen. His flatmate Lorenzo pretended that he didn't notice the coincidence, and they happily watched it together every night. Neither said it out loud – and nobody would guess it from Lorenzo's behaviour – but they were both looking for somebody to settle down with and it was quite informative watching what women liked and didn't like via a daily show that featured genuine relationships. Daniel used it as a way to get his confidence up, taking notes and learning lessons; last night, the bloke that was obviously there as a bit of an underdog had finally found his match, and now here Daniel was in this moment, today. He didn't want to be the underdog in his own life. That show made him feel like he owed it to himself to at least try with this woman. Just to see.

Daniel couldn't help but admire the serendipity of the morning. What were the chances she'd stagger right past him on the morning the advert got published? They'd only been on the same train at the same time on a handful of occasions, including today. He forced himself to breathe deeply. He'd done it – sent off the *Missed Connection* – to maybe, hopefully, finally get her attention, but he was suddenly terrified she'd know it was him. What if she laughed in his face and called him a loser? A dreamer? What if she told everyone at work – her work, or his work – how he was

pathetic, and had dared to think he was good enough for her? Maybe she'd go viral on Twitter, or post his picture on her Instagram. On the one hand, he knew she was too nice to ever be so awful, but on the other, the tiniest voice in the back of his mind told him that's exactly what would happen. He shook his head to try and rid himself of the thought. Love was sending him crazy. Or was it that he was crazy in love?

'Mate, this isn't love,' Lorenzo had told him, not even taking his eyes off the telly to issue his damning verdict. 'You just wanna bang her.'

Daniel did not just want to 'bang her'. That wasn't it at all. He probably shouldn't stare at her silently and from afar, though. That was a bit weird. It was just – well . . . The politics of hitting on a woman seemingly out of the blue were so blurred and loaded. He could hardly approach her cold, like some train psychopath she'd have to shake by 'pretending' they were at her stop and then slipping out and onto a different carriage. But he also knew that if any blokes in his life told him they were trying to seduce a woman they'd never directly spoken to by putting an advert in the paper and then staring at her stealthily somewhere beyond Moorgate, he'd gently suggest that it probably wasn't the most ethically sound plan. He was *trying* to be romantic, whilst also saving face. He hoped he'd got the balance right.

In his head, the fantasy went like this: she'd read the paper and see his note and look up immediately and he'd be right there, by the doors, like he said, and they'd make eye contact and she'd smile coyly and he'd go, simply, 'Hello'. It would be the beginning of the rest of their lives, that 'Hello'. Like in a movie. And in that movie there wouldn't be five Spanish tourists in between them, crowded around in a circle, looking at a map, an indistinguishable babble punctuated occasionally

by the mispronunciation of 'Leicester Square'. Fuck. Where was she? Oh god, this was awful.

The train pulled into London Bridge and, after finally locating her as she steamed ahead through the crowds and towards the exit, the moment he thought might happen disappeared before his eyes. There was no bolt of lightning. No world slowing as their eyes met, not so much as a question but as an answer. She had barely acknowledged him when he held the doors and helped her get on the train – she'd been in a rush, and distracted, and her 'thank you' was more of a breathy 'ta!' as she passed by. As he tried to keep pace with her, Daniel realized he was disappointed in himself, and in the situation. He'd imagined this for weeks, and now . . . nothing.

She suddenly stopped in the middle of the departing commuters to read her phone, but it wasn't like he could slow down as well, let alone stand beside her, could he? So he kept walking and then waited by the exit. He wasn't sure what for. Just to see her, probably. To see her on the day he'd put himself out there, to remind himself it was real, that she was real, even if it hadn't gone to plan.

Later, when Daniel told Lorenzo how the morning had played out, he'd miss out this part – the part where he waited for her. What was he doing? He wasn't going to actually go up and talk to her. Again, she had a right to exist without him bothering her. He shook his head. *Come on mate, get a grip*, he told himself. He headed towards his office, his heart beating loudly and rapidly and disruptively in his chest.

He'd screwed it up.

He was gutted.

She hadn't seen it.

What a wasted gesture.

You bloody idiot, he muttered to himself, unaware that seeing the advert was exactly what was holding Nadia up back on the platform.

3

Nadia

Nads, not being funny but don't you think this sounds like it could be you?!

Nadia tapped on the photo Emma had sent through and waited for it to download, simultaneously bumping through the commuters heaving in the opposite direction to her.

The photo was a close-up of that morning's paper, specifically the *Missed Connections* section – the bit where Londoners wrote in about their commute crush and left hints about their identity in the hopes of landing a date with a stranger they'd seen on the bus or tube. Nadia and Emma were obsessed with *Missed Connections*. It was a mix of horror and awe – the same kind of compulsion that drove their love of reality TV.

The mating rituals of the sexes were a constant source of fascination for them both. Before she got the restaurant review column – a superb job for any best friend to have, since Nadia was frequently her plus-one – Emma used to be

the dating columnist at one of the weekly women's mags, but most of her material was crowd-sourced from after-work drinks with Nadia and sometimes Nadia's work best friend, Gaby.

Romance and lust and sex and relationships were of endless interest for them all, and ever since they'd known each other, bad dates were almost worth it in order to have an outrageous story to share the next day. They'd had four-fingers-in-his-bum guy, and the divorced chap who'd disclosed on their first date that his wife had left him because he 'couldn't satisfy her – you know, sexually'. There'd been 'Actually-I'm-in-an-open-marriage-my-wife-just-doesn't-know-it' man, and also the one who picked at the eczema behind his ear and proceeded to eat it in between mouthfuls of his pint.

Emma once accidentally had three dates with a man Gaby had previously dated – Gaby had dumped him because he refused to wear a condom, and Emma found that out only after she'd dumped him for . . . refusing to wear a condom. For some reason all three of them had dated more than a handful of men called James, who ended up being referred to by number: James One, James Six, James Nine. The most memorable bloke was Period Pete, a friend of a friend who liked performing oral sex on menstruating women, and who the three collectively decided must have an undiagnosed iron deficiency.

Nadia, Gaby and Emma had talked about them all, trying to understand the puzzle of men-kind. Well, except for the one who said he'd be too busy to have a girlfriend 'for the next five years, at least', who Nadia had simply never texted back again. He was a riddle not worth trying to solve. She didn't want a man she had to teach kindness to.

Nadia wondered if it would change if any of them ever

got married – if they'd stop telling each other everything about their sex and love lives. She hoped not. She hoped that even in marriage or after fifty years with her hypothetical guy that there would still be romance and mystery and tension that she'd want to gossip over with her girlfriends. She'd heard on an Esther Perel podcast that that was important. For a woman who historically hadn't been very good at it, Nadia spent a lot of time researching love.

The image Emma had photographed cleared into vision and Nadia saw that it said:

To the devastatingly cute blonde girl on the Northern line with the black designer handbag and coffee stains on her dress – you get on at Angel, on the 7.30, always at the end nearest the escalator, and always in a hurry. I'm the guy who's standing near the doors of your carriage, hoping today's a day you haven't overslept. Drink some time?

Nadia stopped walking, causing a woman behind her to side-step and mutter, 'Oh, for god's sake.'

She reread the note.

The devastatingly cute blonde girl on the Northern line with the black designer handbag and coffee stains on her dress. She spun around to look back at the train she'd just disembarked. It had already left. She dropped her hand to run a finger over the brown mark on her dress. She looked at her handbag. She WhatsApped Emma back.

!!!!!!!!! she typed with one hand.

And then, *Um . . . I mean, lol but maybe?!*

After a beat she thought better of it: *I mean, the chances are slim, right?*

She mulled it over some more. She and Emma weren't

even sure that *Missed Connections* was real. It made her initial reaction seem increasingly off the mark. Nadia and Emma didn't care one way or the other – if it was real or made up by the weekly intern at the paper as a creative writing exercise – it was the fantasy of a stranger searching for somebody they felt a fleeting connection to that was fun. It was like Savage Garden knowing they loved you before they met you.

It was romantic, in a you're-a-blank-canvas-I-can-project-my-hopes-and-dreams-on sort of way.

In a fantasies-don't-have-problems-so-this-is-better-than-real-life way.

An our-love-will-be-different way.

Missed Connections felt full of more romance than messing around on Bumble did. Although, any time either of them doubted that sort of love existed, the other would bring up Tim, Emma's brother. He'd gone out to Chicago for a couple of weeks for work and used a dating app to meet a local who could show him around, maybe even partake in a fling. Through that app Tim had met Deena, and legend had it that when Deena went to the loo Tim pulled out his phone, deleted the app, and within three months had transferred out there to live with her. They'd got married that spring. *Miracles do happen*, Tim had said in his speech. *I searched the whole world for you, and there you were, waiting for me in downtown Chicago, in a restaurant window seat.*

Emma texted: *Question: are you sporting a coffee stain this morning, and did you get the 7.30? It's Monday, so I presume yes.*

Nadia replied with a snap of her outfit from above – the splodge of butter-laden coffee clearly visible – very obviously on her way to work.

But, Nadia thought . . . surely there were a million women

on the Northern line spilling coffee and carrying fancy bags that family members had sourced at discounted designer outlets. And nobody ever did things on time – not in London. Loads of cute blondes – *devastatingly cute* blondes – probably missed their intended train all the time. And yeah, she'd never really thought about how she instinctively always turned left at the bottom of Angel's escalator and walked towards the end of the track there, but that *was* something she did. Who else did? Hundreds, surely. Thousands? It was the longest tube escalator in London, after all. It could hold a lot of people.

Right then, Emma sent back, love heart emojis before and after her text, *I think we've got some investigating to do, don't you?*

I'm dying, Nadia wrote back. *It's totally not me. I'm grateful to all the other women out there who can't take a coffee cup on a train without spilling it, though. Makes me feel better about myself, lol.*

Could be you, though . . . Emma said.

Nadia considered it. *I mean, there's like a 2 per cent chance*, she typed. And then: *If that.*

Then it hit her: the man by the train doors, reading the paper. There'd been a man there! Was that him? Men must stand by the door and read the paper all the time, what with being male and commuting and picking up a newspaper on the way being statistically quite high. Nadia looked around the station, to see if she recognized anyone as the man she'd been near. She couldn't even remember what he'd looked like. Blonde? No. Brunette? Definitely handsome. Oh god.

A weird feeling of hope that it *was* her came over Nadia, whilst she simultaneously realized that hoping for that was kind of non-feminist too. She didn't have to wait to be chosen by a mystery man to date and be happy. Did she?

But – also – in *The New Routine to Change Her Life*, Nadia was supposed to believe that luck was on her side. And if luck really was on her side, maybe this was for her, and maybe this guy wouldn't be an insecure loser. Awful Ben, her last boyfriend, had had a weird fragile masculinity – he was emotionally manipulative and made her think *she* was in the wrong until he'd undone her confidence. And he did do that – he did undo her confidence. It had really bruised her, because for the six months they dated she almost came to believe there was something wrong with her. She still didn't understand why somebody would do that: say they'd fallen in love with you and then decide to hate everything that made them say that in first place. She was only just starting to feel like herself again.

Nadia shuddered at the bad memories. She thought about Awful Ben every day still, but when she did she always thanked the heavens that she was now out of that dire situation. She couldn't believe what she'd let herself put up with. Occasionally she set her web browser to private and typed in his Instagram handle to check he was still as much of a difficult, pretentious arse as ever. He always was.

But now, months after their break-up, Nadia was equal parts bruised and in need of an emotional palette cleanser. A romantic sorbet. Somebody new to think about. A man to be a bit nice to her would do, as if that didn't place the bar too low. Perhaps her own newspaper ad would read, *Wanted, man: must actually seem to like me.*

Oh, who was she kidding? Her advert would say: *Wanted: man with strong sense of self, capable of having a laugh, healthy relationship with mother. Must love romance, reality television, and be ready to champion and cheerlead as a partner through*

life, in exchange for exactly the same. Also must understand the importance of cunnilingus and pizza – though not at same time. I cum first, pizza comes second.

Was she expecting too much? She thought of Tim and Deena. Surely she could have that too.

2 per cent is higher than 0 per cent, typed back Emma. *So, game on.*

Nadia laughed as she finally made her way to the escalator, emerging in the early-morning summer sun at the top. *Whatever you say*, she typed back. And to herself she thought, *But I daren't be too hopeful.*

‘Emma has already texted me,’ Gaby said, catching Nadia as she headed down to the lobby for an 11 a.m. break. The coffee cart in their lobby served an amazing dark espresso blend. ‘And I reckon it’s you as well.’

Nadia was astonished.

‘Ohmygod. Worst thing I ever did was introduce you two to each other,’ she replied, laughing, before saying to the guy behind the counter, ‘double-shot espresso topped up with hot water, please.’

Gaby pulled a face. ‘What happened to a full-fat cappuccino as a political statement?’

‘I’m pivoting. I did one of those bulletproof coffees this morning, to see if it keeps my blood sugar regulated and also, have you seen this acne on my jawline? It’s a menace. I think it might be too much milk – like, apparently milk is just cow hormones not meant for people – so I’m giving up for a bit. These little fuckers hurt, you know.

Nadia craned to see her own reflection in the glass of the skyscraper they worked in. Having acne made her really

self-conscious. When she was in the middle of a flare-up she tended to dress in darker colours, as if she didn't want to be noticed. She needed a permanent filter to follow her around – it didn't look half as bad when she was on Instagram Stories and could use the crown filter to smooth everything out. She'd try anything to get rid of the angry red boils under the skin of her jaw, including sacrificing her daily cappuccinos.

'So,' she went on, 'I'm experimenting.'

Nadia thanked the barista and the pair walked from the lobby coffee stand to the lifts of RAINFOREST, home to two thousand Research and Development employees for a world-wide delivery service for everything from books to toilet cleaner to marble-top tables. This was where Nadia did her artificial intelligence work. Gaby was her work BFF. They'd met at the summer party two years ago and hit it off talking about AI and its role in a Good Future or Bad Future: what if they accidentally developed technology that turned on them, like in a horror movie? Gaby worked on what was called 'cloud computing' for the company, their biggest revenue-generator, selling pay-as-you-go data storage to everyone from start-ups to MI6. Nadia didn't really understand it, but she knew Gaby was about thirty times cleverer than her, and scared half the people in her part of the office.

'And, anyway – can I tell you about The New Routine to Change My Life?' Nadia hit the lift button. 'Because, I dunno. I guess I feel finally purged of Awful Ben and want to switch my energy up or something. I feel like I just came out of mourning. Like literally, this weekend I got my mojo back.' The lift arrived. 'And today I'm trying to be deliberate about keeping it. I'm taking my wellbeing and mental health seriously, beginning now.'

‘That’s great!’

‘Thanks!’ The lift button flashed ‘0’ and the doors opened. The pair got in and Nadia hit the buttons for their respective floors.

‘You know, if you want to get some endorphins going to keep your high, what about coming to spin before work tomorrow?’

Nadia rolled her eyes.

‘No!’ Gaby continued. ‘Don’t pull that face! It’s so good. It’s really dark in there and the instructor says positive affirmations and you get to scream because the music is so loud nobody can hear you.’

Nadia shook her head, watching the lights of the different floors ping brightly as they passed through. Spinning was her worst nightmare. She’d done exactly one SoulCycle class when she went to LA for work and spent forty-five minutes on a bike next to Emily Ratajkowski, wondering how a woman so tiny could peddle so fast. She’d hated it.

‘Absolutely not. I don’t do morning workouts. I’m happy with my evening body pump class, back row, two left feet but doing my best. Only psychopaths work out before noon.’

‘Urgh. Fine. Also – we’re getting sidetracked.’

‘I’d hoped you hadn’t noticed.’

‘It really does sound like you, you know.’

Nadia raised her eyebrows, partly amused, partly sarcastic.

‘It does! Literally you are cute and blonde and chronically late and you spill stuff. And –’ Gaby suddenly seemed to connect some mental dots ‘– and today is the beginning of your New Routine to Change Your Life! So, energetically speaking, the exact day something like this *would* happen. It’s like the stars have aligned. Today would be a great day to fall in love.’

'I can't tell if you're being earnest or teasing me.'

'Both,' Gaby deadpanned.

Nadia rolled her eyes good-naturedly again, afraid to give herself away.

'Emma says you might write an advert in response.'

'I'm toying with it, yes. If I decide the advert is really meant for me. Which . . . I'm not sure. I half want it to be. And I half think I'm insane for giving this more than two seconds' thought.'

'Do you have any idea who he could be? If it is for you? Is there a cute man on your train every day?'

Nadia looked at her friend. 'This is London! There are hundreds of cute men, everywhere, all the time. And then they open their mouths and become 200 per cent less cute because . . . men.'

'Ever the optimist, I see.'

'I'm just being realistic.'

'Never met a woman protecting her heart who didn't claim the same,' said Gaby, smirking.

Nadia said nothing, knowing full well that Gaby was right. She found herself doing that a lot: making sweeping statements that damned men to their lowest denominator, acting as if she didn't need or want one. She *was* protecting herself, she supposed, at least out loud. Of course, her friend could see right through that. Because Nadia was, in the same breath as saying all men were pigs, hoping that this one, the Train Guy, wasn't. Or, at the very least, that one guy, somewhere out there, wasn't. All morning she'd been having little fantasies about the advert being for her, and seeing him on the train, and falling in lust and love somewhere on the Northern line between home and work. She wanted that for herself. She wanted it for herself so hungrily that it scared her a bit, truth be told.

The lift arrived at Gaby's floor, and like they did whenever they rode the lift together, Nadia stepped off with her to finish the conversation.

'There is this one thing, though,' Nadia said. Gaby turned and looked at her, willing her to go on. 'Well. The thing my brain can't understand is that if a guy sees me on the train every morning, why wouldn't he just say hello?'

Becky from admin walked by on her way to the photocopier, and Nadia interrupted herself to throw up a small wave and say, 'Hey, Becky!'

'Nice shoes!' Becky said, as way of reply, disappearing around a corner.

Nadia continued: 'Why concoct some elaborate plot that involves a newspaper and relying on me – or, whoever, because it might not be me, like we've established – actually seeing it?'

'It's fun!' Gaby said. 'Cute!' She thought about it some more and then added, 'Plus, if some rando came up to you on your commute, would you honestly even give him the time of day?'

Nadia smiled. 'No. I'd think he was a creep.'

'Me too.'

'Urgh!' Nadia exhaled. 'I'm just trying to manage my romantic expectations, you know? I don't even know if I could stand another first date . . .'

Nadia made a noise that was like a gag of repulsion, summing up the many emotions of a serial dater in as succinct a way as any. But, even as she did that, her heart skipped a little beat. When a first date went right, it was the most magical, hopeful feeling in the world. A feeling of the gods smiling on her, of recognizing herself in somebody else. She once heard that love shouldn't be called 'falling', because the

best love roots you, and makes you grow upwards, taller and stronger. She'd seen that happen with her mum and step-dad, after her biological father had left. Her old colleague and friend Naomi and Naomi's husband Callum embodied it. Her direct boss in her first job, Katherine, was the most charismatic, well-adjusted woman Nadia had ever had the honour of being mentored by, and Katherine often said she had got to be where she was at work because of the team she was part of at home. All of them said they knew early on that they'd met the person they wanted to spend their lives with, and committed, together, to making it work. Tim had said that about Deena, too.

'No – you couldn't stand another *bad* first date,' said Gaby. 'But what if this was the last first date you ever had, because it was so *good*?'

Nadia was grateful that Gaby was playing to her more romantic inclinations, because she was enjoying imagining what would happen if she met the love of her life through a newspaper ad. How they'd laugh about it, and be forever united in their appreciation of big gestures and taking chances. But Nadia was suddenly suspicious too: Gaby was usually sceptical and pithy about love, priding herself on dating man after man but not needing any of them. It wasn't like her to coax anyone into believing fairy tales were real.

'What's made you such a romantic all of a sudden?' Nadia asked, eyes narrowed. 'You're supposed to be my cynical friend.'

Gaby shrugged, non-committal. 'What are you working on today?' she said, by way of reply.

'Now who's changing the subject!'

'Don't get smart with me, Fielding.'

Nadia made a mental note to follow up with Gaby later

on her sudden softening. Something was different about her, now she thought about it. Nadia was a tart for her work, though, and so was seduced by her own vanity into talking about it.

‘It’s crunch time on the prototypes for the fulfilment centres soon. That newspaper exposé really damaged the stock price and John wants actual humans out of the role as soon as possible to get the whole thing boxed off as an HR issue. Which sucks for the thousands of people who don’t know they’re going to be unemployed by Christmas . . .’

‘Oh, that’s hard. That’s really hard,’ Gaby said.

‘I feel bad, yeah. I’m building robots to replace humans, and . . . well. It’s so conflicting, you know?’

The lift pinged back open, and seeing that it was going up, Nadia stepped in.

‘To be continued?’ said Gaby.

‘To be continued,’ said Nadia. ‘I’d like to maybe brainstorm ideas about making sure everyone gets jobs elsewhere? I’d like to help.’

‘Sure!’ Gaby said, adding: ‘Maybe over lunch this week? Wednesday? I’ve got a lunch meeting tomorrow. We’ve not been across to Borough in ages. And we’re not done talking about this missed connection.’

‘Stop talking to Emma about my love life!’

Nadia could hear Gaby giggling even as the lift went up.

4

Daniel

‘You’ve been infatuated with her for months, mate. Today is a big day!’

Lorenzo had called him at work, despite being asked not to. But Lorenzo hated his job and got bored easily and liked winding up his flatmate and also feigning busyness at his own desk, at a publishing house north of the river. Plus, he was charming enough to persuade the receptionist, Percy, to connect the call, even though Daniel had given Percy numerous and explicit instructions not to. Lorenzo enjoyed practising his charm and getting his own way. Reaching Daniel at his office was another way for him to show off.

‘She’s not bloody seen it, though,’ Daniel hissed down the phone.

‘Can you change the adjectives and send it again, for somebody else you’ve spotted? Throw enough shit and something will stick,’ Lorenzo said, and Daniel was about 70 per cent sure he wasn’t joking. Lorenzo *said* he wanted a relationship,

but from what Daniel had seen his requirements for dating were that she had a pulse, and didn't talk too much. It was very Lorenzo of him to suggest simply trying the same tactic with another woman.

'Go and sell some books,' Daniel retorted.

'Can't be arsed, mate. Still on a comedown.'

Daniel hated that Lorenzo did coke Thursday through Sunday. He never did it at home, Lorenzo promised, but Daniel was still the one made to put up with his mood swings as he scaled the walls and then festered on the sofa for the first half of the week – even if he did watch great telly as he did it. Lorenzo was a good bloke, but didn't half make some choices that Daniel couldn't help but think weren't exactly sound. It was so frustrating to be witness to. They'd ended up living together through a SpareRoom.co.uk advert Lorenzo had put up, and Daniel had his suspicions from the beginning that they were a bit chalk and cheese, but the location of the flat and the rent price were basically perfect, so Daniel had made a decision to largely overlook their differences, not quite becoming friends, but certainly becoming more than just strangers who lived together. They had forged their own, very particular, double act, and until Daniel had a place of his own, it did the job.

'I'm going now,' Daniel said. 'I've got actual work to do. I'll see you at home.'

Lorenzo was still talking as he put the phone down. Not seconds later, Daniel's mobile flashed with a message. It was Lorenzo.

Well done on having the balls, mate, it said. That was Lorenzo's way of saying, *I know you hate it when I'm a twat but I can't help it.* Daniel double-tapped it and gave it a thumbs-up.

Daniel resumed idly scrolling through the emails on his desktop, trying to focus on the day ahead and not on the morning that had been. He couldn't. He couldn't stop thinking about her. He couldn't stop thinking about the day they first met.

Not long after Daniel's father had died, just after Easter, Daniel had begun to force himself to leave his desk whenever he felt claustrophobic, or uneasy, or like he might cry. In his grief – the word 'depression' still sort of stuck in his throat a bit, sounded a bit wet – his therapist had said that being outside, in nature, would always help.

Christ. He couldn't believe he had a *therapist*.

'Keep using your body, make sure you engage with the world, take a stroll around the nearest park, even, just to get the energy moving differently,' she told him at one of their first sessions together, when he'd said about panic attacks that grabbed him by the throat and made him feel like he couldn't breathe.

He'd had to pay sixty-five pounds an hour to go private because the NHS waiting list was too long, his situation too dire to wait because he could barely function, and he wondered, not unkindly, if this was the kind of advice he could expect for two hundred plus quid a month. Anyway. Walk he did, at the very least to feel like he was getting value for money, and she'd been there, Nadia (of course, he didn't know that was her name then), in the courtyard tucked away off Borough Market. A random Friday. Poof. At his lowest, in a moment of pure emotional desperation, this positive, engaged, clever woman had appeared and her verve – her very essence, her aura – was like sunshine, solar-powering everyone around her. It had knocked Daniel sideways.

Daniel knew exactly which day he'd first seen her because

it was two weeks after the funeral, and five weeks after he'd started his six-month consulting contract at Converge, a petroleum engineering firm. It was the day his mother had rung when he was in a meeting about the design flaws of a submersive drill, and he'd excused himself in time to pick up in case it was urgent.

She'd said, 'He's here.'

'What do you mean, Mum?' Daniel had replied. 'Dad's . . . Dad died, remember?'

He'd held his breath as he waited for her to realize she'd used the wrong word, said the wrong thing. He held up two fingers to the guys on the other side of the glass partition, signalling two minutes. He just needed two minutes. They were impatient, needing his sign-off before lunch, and suspicious of an outsider coming in this late in the project and pissed off that he'd been pushing for a pivot on the next steps. He didn't care. He wanted to make sure his mum was okay. He wouldn't be able to handle it if she had dementia or memory loss or something. He'd just lost his dad – he couldn't lose her too.

'Daniel,' she'd replied, level-headed. 'I know he's bloody dead. It's his ashes. They've just been dropped off.'

Daniel exhaled loudly in relief. She wasn't crazy. Well. Any crazier.

'But it's a bloody bin bag's worth! He's so bloody heavy I can't shift him anywhere. So he's just here. In the kitchen with me, by the back door. All his ashes in a heavy-duty bag that I don't know what to do with.'

Daniel closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, stunned. His dad's ashes. Because his dad was dead.

'I'm having a coffee and telling him – your dad – about Janet Peterson's new Vauxhall Mokka – they had it in gold,

can you bear it! Gold! And you know, I say new but obviously it's good second-hand. Cars lose money as soon as you drive them off the forecourt – but anyway, it's a bit creepy. Your dad. Can you come by after work and help me?

Daniel could almost have laughed. In fact, he did laugh, and told his mum he'd be across to Ealing Broadway at about seven, and in the meantime to go hang out in the living room to watch *Loose Women* instead. She'd been so strong since the funeral that it made him feel ashamed to be the "weak" one. He was about to go back into the meeting – literally had his hand on the door knob to push back through – when his throat closed up and his shirt collar felt tight and he had a vague notion that he might be sick, because his body was remembering, all over again, that his dad was gone. His best mate. His loudest champion. Dead from a ruptured brain aneurysm.

They'd been drinking pints in the pub together before Sunday lunch, his dad telling Daniel he could help him with a flat deposit and not to worry about it, it wasn't a loan it was a gift, he wanted to see him sorted and London property prices were so crazy now he'd never be able to do it alone. It was weird for a thirty-year-old to have a flatmate, his dad said – he'd had a kid and a wife by that age. Daniel had said he'd think about it, that he was a bit proud to accept a handout, that it was normal to be thirty and have a flatmate in London, it was an expensive place, he liked the company, and living in Kentish Town, and that afternoon, before he could accept and say, 'Dad, I love you, cheers for looking out for me', over the spicy bazargan at home his sixty-two-year-old dad had keeled over and had never woken up. In a single hour, everything was different and nothing was the same and Daniel had lost the man who'd made him.

Daniel made a break for it, after that phone call, turning on his heel with his head dipped down to cover his face, a face that was ashen and streaked with tears. He took the back stairs, all twenty-three flights of them, down to the ground floor, and pushed out of an emergency exit onto the street. He stood with his back against the wall, panting. He didn't realize he'd started walking until he flopped down on a circular bench in the sun, drenched in sweat, somewhere off the market. He sat, closed his eyes, breathed deeply, let the tears and sweat dry, and thought about his dad, thought about how lonely he was, thought about how badly he'd been sleeping and how the insomnia might be the thing to drive him truly mad.

On the bench he'd had his back to her, at first. He'd been staring at nothing in particular, just sort of letting the sun be on his face and closing his eyes to do a bit of deep breathing, reminding himself that he would be okay. He didn't call it a 'mantra' as such, but when he missed his dad in his bones he'd say in his head, 'Be alive, and remember to live. Be alive, and remember to live. Be alive, and remember to live . . .'

He became vaguely aware of a voice just over his left shoulder getting louder and louder, and he tuned his ear into it like a radio dial finding a signal on a country road, until he could hear a woman's voice clearly saying:

' . . . Because it's going to be built anyway, right? So it needs to be built by people who come from lower-class or lower-income families . . .'

That was what had made Daniel pay particular attention. He was the first in his family to go to university. His family was very modest. His dad had missed only three days of work as a postman in his forty-year tenure, putting Daniel through

a degree with hardly any debt. It had been important to him that his child had the opportunities he hadn't. The woman's voice continued: 'The only way artificial intelligence will ever look after poorer people is if people from these underprivileged communities are the ones programming it.'

As an engineer, Daniel had a small amount of knowledge of artificial intelligence, but not much. 'The next industrial revolution,' one of his undergrad professors had declared, but Daniel had preferred the known entities of maths and equations and building things for the now, not the future. Daniel craned over his shoulder a little to see who was talking. There was a guy – suit trousers with no belt, obviously fitted by a tailor to the exact drop of his hip, narrow pinstripe instead of plain black, shoes so shiny you could see your reflection in them – giving the girl a sort of wry look. A smirk.

'I'm not sure about that . . .' the wry-smile guy said.

Daniel didn't like him at all. He looked like he was from the gang at university for whom everything had come easy. The good-looking guys with the athletic frames who didn't play football or rugby but played tennis or lacrosse. They got pretty average grades but were the first ones to get above average jobs, because their families all knew other families who could put in a good word. Daniel had friends at university – good ones, who he still knew now – but they'd all grafted, all been the working-class kids whose accents got mysteriously broader in the company of the posh boys, as if to hold up their class difference as a shield instead of bowing to the pressure to act like they were from somewhere they weren't. A small 'fuck you' to privilege.

Most posh boys were amused by it, and a couple even tried to befriend Daniel, but he always felt like it was a game to them. That them being 'unable to see class' meant they

could acquire a friend from a working-class family who spoke with different vowels and it be a testament to their own character. But anyone who comes from very little money knows never to trust a bloke who says money doesn't buy happiness. Money buys food and electricity and pays for a school jumper without holes in it so you don't get picked on, and you can't be happy without that.

The woman talking was smooth. She wasn't losing her temper as she explained her theory to this loaded rich guy, but she was passionate. Cared.

'We need kids from underprivileged communities being recruited directly so that they take this technology in the right direction. Otherwise it's just a bunch of rich people making rich-people decisions that continue to screw over millions of people for not being rich – like literally, the gap between the haves and have-nots will get to the point where there will be a minimum net worth a person has to have to even be alive. It's sickening. Sickening! But we can absolutely do something about it.'

Daniel loved what he was hearing. He loved this woman, with her unbrushed hair and crazy arms and rice burrito and big ideas about social responsibility. He thought, *My dad would like her*. He positioned himself at a bit more of an angle so he could see her.

The rich man held up his hands. 'Okay, okay. Jesus, Nadia, you can have the fund. We'll do something. I hear you.' He shook his head, laughing. 'I'll talk to the board. Give me a month or so.'

Nadia – *so that was her name* – laughed too.

Daniel had stood up at that point, his Apple Watch buzzing on his wrist to remind him that he had a conference call with the Cape Town office in ten minutes. The geologists had

analysed the surface structures of the new site and he needed their input to know what to do about the drilling problem. He knew he couldn't miss it if they were to come in under budget – and Daniel's USP was that he always under-promised and over-delivered. That's why he could charge the day rate he did. He felt much better now anyway. Now that he knew this woman existed.

He made eye contact with her before he left. It felt like the bravest thing he'd done in months. She was beautiful and untamed. He stumbled a little, backing away from the pair, unsteady on his feet. She half watched him, looked at him for what could only have been half a second but felt like a full minute to Daniel, and then she turned back to Rich Man. Daniel felt like he'd been slapped by the Love Gods, and it wasn't his dad he thought about as he walked through the doors of his office, but the woman.

'She just had this . . . *spirit*,' he said to Lorenzo, later on. 'And no ring on her finger either. I checked.'

Lorenzo had laughed. 'This is the first time you've seemed even vaguely excited by something since your dad, mate. I'm pleased for you.' And then, in a lower, more serious voice: 'You'll never see her again, though, of course. Don't get too carried away.'