

CHAPTER 1

Whenever the first of January came round, I had a habit of imagining myself a year on, as someone who had enigmatically outgrown the person I was in that moment. But year after year, it was like déjà vu – and it was starting to get old.

I had always thought of my life in Topsham as a sort of drawn-out prelude to the life I planned on eventually living. I'd expected that once I'd done all the things you're supposed to do – like finish school and university – I'd float naturally into a job for some London-based fashion designer, who would be blown away by a talent that even I'd been uncertain I possessed. I'd live in a flat with palm-printed wallpaper and a free-standing bath, wear embroidered kimonos and get a blue tick by my name on Instagram. I hadn't accounted for being sucked back into the arse-end-of-nowhere to pull pints and wait for a call from the recruiters who had sounded so eager when I was fresh out of the graduate oven back in June. And I certainly hadn't accounted for spending New Year's Day on yet another bathroom floor I didn't recognise, in England's tiniest town.

'You're not still looking for it, are you?' Billie called out from the other side of the door.

I cradled the toilet basin. 'Looking for what?' I said, moving my mouth as little as possible in case it put pressure on my stomach, which was at that very moment threatening to expel the contents of the night before.

The door opened a crack and Billie looked down at me, her blood-red, boy-short hair standing up in all directions. 'Your G spot? Last night you were worried you didn't have one.'

It was then that I winced – not because of what she'd said, but because it reminded me that I'd sent an unsolicited selfie, at three in the morning, to Tim, the on-off fling who hadn't been ready for anything serious throughout the three years we were at university, whom I hadn't seen since graduating and whom I had been known – after a few drinks – to refer to as 'my first love'.

Please.

'Shit,' I muttered.

'Still missing then?' she said.

I wriggled my hand around the floor for my iPhone and braved a peek at the damage: an aerial shot of myself on the loo, captioned, 'Miss me?', as if murky urine framed by average thighs was a truly irresistible thing. Seeing it in the cold light of day, I had a vision of myself shrinking in size and morphing into the screaming face emoji.

I held the phone up to show Billie and moaned. 'This is a disaster!'

I never sent messages like that to Tim, or anyone I was seeing, in the daytime. I was very much Cool Girl in the daytime. That was my safe spot, even if it got me nowhere closer to the discovery of my G spot. That was what he'd always liked about me. No pressure, no strings. Nothing in it for me, basically.

Billie looked at the photo, shrugged, and said, 'At least your piss looks good,' because she knew it would make me laugh. She always knew how to make me laugh.

Billie and I met at school. She was in the year above me, where she had earned herself the uncreative nickname 'Dyke', owing to the fact that she was the only girl in her year who wasn't a walking blow job charity, and, to be fair, looked a lot like Ant or Dec. We came across each other

on a tree-lined hill near school that was called 'the smoker's slope', and its function was self-explanatory. One day, when it was just the two of us, she said to me, 'Can I tell you something, as a friend? I don't think you know how to inhale a fag properly.' I looked at her, amazed that she'd taken notice of some girl in the year below. And it was true. I just took little bird-like sucks on the end of my Lucky Strikes, which was why my cigarettes took longer than everyone else's to burn down, though sometimes I'd blow into them to speed up the process. So Billie kindly taught me how it was done and we'd been best friends ever since. I'd been addicted to cigarettes ever since, too.

'Where are we?' I asked, unsticking my tongue from the roof of my mouth several times in a row.

She shook her head and gave me a look that said, 'You don't want to know.' Billie was my only fun friend and I was hers, so the people we ended up mingling with on nights out were usually unpalatable before the sixth tequila or when you were on their bathroom floor the next day, dying of alcohol poisoning.

'Can we Irish?' I asked hopefully, not in the mood to be polite to anyone.

Billie held her finger to her lips, reaching out with her other hand to haul me up off the ground. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, looking like the grim reaper in a blonde wig – or, rather, an orange-tinged wig, thanks to the home-dye job. As I followed her out, I realized – or remembered – that we were on a boat. I had a fleeting vision of looking out the small window to find that we were halfway to France, but thankfully, or maybe disappointingly, we had not drifted from the sleepy quayside of the town that I'd spent my whole life waiting to leave.

Billie handed me my raincoat as she threw on the bomber jacket that I'd customized with patches and sequins for her when we were sixteen (I'd hardly seen her wear anything else since) and we made a beeline for the exit.

'Can I come back to yours?' I asked as we tumbled out onto the path and started walking.

'I love you, but I need a few more hours' kip before my shift,' she said. 'And you'll want to talk my ear off.'

I got it. She needed her space. Something that I found I had way too much of. Too much space was bad. Too much space led to boredom, and if you let boredom happen, it often mutated into something much gloomier.

'Can I come for a drink later, while you're working?' I asked. 'I'll kill you if you don't.' With that we parted ways, and my mind began spinning with a faux-methodical reverie detailing exactly what I'd do from that moment on: walk briskly home, prepare a cheese and mayonnaise sandwich, boil the kettle, eat the sandwich while listening to some podcast that would likely instruct me how to be a better human, make coffee, run a bath, soak in said bath while drinking coffee, get into pyjamas, get into bed and take out my long-suffering sketchbook to draw for the rest of the day. I hoped that the familiarity of drawing would be comforting. More than that, I hoped that I'd feel resourceful by feeding the burgeoning fantasy of becoming a fashion designer, which was still loitering in the back of my mind, like something on a hypothetical to-do list.

When I reached the end of my road, I put the whole plan on pause and sat down on someone's doorstep to light a cigarette. My mother would probably be up and she didn't know that I was a

smoker. You'd think as a fully-fledged adult, I'd be able to admit to it, take the disapproving headshake on the chin and move on with life. But, not so.

I took out my phone and opened the Notes application to do what you were meant to do at the start of the year, but what I probably should have done six months earlier.

1 January 2016, 9.02 a.m.

NY RESOLUTIONS

Delete Tim's number
Get job IN LONDON
Make money
Exercise 5 times a week
Have sex at least once a month Find my G spot

Make more fun friends
Take a course in design
Give up carbs and sugar mon-fri Rebrand personal style – less high st Move out of home TO LONDON