

## CHAPTER 1

Being a 28-year-old woman is legitimately less fun than being a 27-year-old one because the people you meet at parties suddenly seem to fall into two categories: too sober to flirt, or too fucked to fuck.

I explained this to Clara in the form of an anecdote, lying in bed one morning, while she sipped a cup of English Breakfast tea and I wished that I drank English Breakfast tea instead of coffee bought only from very specific cafés. The anecdote was a capsulized – and perhaps dramatized – description of the birthday party I’d been at the night before, where two thirds of the room got up and left as soon as the cake had been cut. That’s right, two thirds, and I’d only been in Club Twenty-Eight a month. The point of the story was that, in among the two thirds who flattened their hands over the rims of their wine glasses every time a refill was offered, was the shaggy-haired photographer whom I’d spent the better part of three months trying to casually run into, because we’d once had a really laughy conversation at a wedding about all the ways to sign off an email. (‘Excuse the brevity and any errors. I’m on my period.’) I took his departure as a sign that I should draw a line under thoughts of a potential *affaire de cœur*. You wouldn’t leave a party if someone you were remotely into was there, would you?

I finished the story with an aghast statement: ‘One guy was driving back to the country, after dinner!’

‘And what did the rest of you do?’ asked Clara, her voice both stilted and dulcet, as it has been since she was a child.

‘Sat at the table drinking rum and water, because no one could be bothered to go to the shop for mixers.’ Together, our voices sounded like gravel being rolled through honey.

‘I don’t know which night sounds more depressing,’ she said. Of course, we both knew which one she thought was more depressing. ‘But at least you stayed away from the “too fucked to fuck” category.’ She even made ‘fuck’ sound silky and sweet.

‘That is true,’ I said, knowing that she was referring to one individual in particular who had never been known to refuse a refill. ‘I’m almost four months clean of him now,’ I added, even though she hadn’t asked, and even though I thought about Mr Too Fucked To Fuck almost every day and the only thing stopping me from picking up the phone to him between midnight and mid-morning was the fear that he wouldn’t reply.

‘I wish I could’ve come last night,’ she said, which was a white lie, either for my benefit or that of our mutual friend whose birthday she’d missed, on account of too much to learn for Monday’s audition.

‘How’re those lines going?’ I asked, taking a swig of water from the plastic Evian bottle that I’d bought in a moment of rebellion, but which was now causing a cellophane-wrapped globe to weigh down on my chest.

Clara shrugged, lifting the mug to her lips, and her blonde fringe came tumbling forwards like tiny theatre curtains. When she realized it was empty, she glanced inside indignantly, like the tea had failed her. I wished that I could conjure

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more tea, right then and there. But, as I couldn't, I helpfully offered to go over lines with her.

'That would be heaven, if you're not too busy,' she said, setting the mug aside having rendered it useless.

There was a heap of laundry glowering at me from the corner of the room, empty toiletry bottles that needed replenishing, a birthday cheque from my tech-unsavvy mother that needed depositing, the latest Ottessa Moshfegh novel by my bed calling out to be devoured, hair in desperate need of a colour touch-up – who knew brunettes went grey in their twenties? – and I really did need to turn that idea for an article into a pitch – 'How To Dress Like A Man Booker-Nominated Author' – before the moment passed.

But it was rare to have Clara in London for the weekend and even rarer for her to be here without Ed. There was also the old chestnut of my constant striving to make sure that living with me was as joyous and fun an experience as possible, so that she wouldn't be tempted to shack up with him prematurely. And I did have a way of getting her to memorize lines like no one else. So, of course, I told her I'd be happy to help. I could probably even trick her into drinking a bottle of wine with me afterwards.

Once it was settled as a plan, Clara daintily removed herself from the cloud of my bed and I felt a twinge in my chest that would've made me call out, 'Don't go, please don't break this moment of hungover, girl-loving bliss!' had I no basic understanding of how crazy I'd sound. Instead, I brought up the issue of her birthday, the following week, reminding her that I needed her final guest list for the small do I was organizing. It wasn't a surprise party; it was just a party that Clara had no interest in organizing for herself, so I had taken on the task,

as I had done for most of her birthdays. Every year, when she muttered words about not bothering to do anything, I'd jump in and say, 'I'll plan a party for you,' and she'd shrug like, 'Fine, suit yourself,' but she always had the best time. I was determined that this year would be no different, especially because we hadn't done one the previous year. Ed had taken her to Hong Kong instead.

'Oh, you do the list,' she said. 'You're better at these things than me.' With that, I watched her walk off in her matching silk pyjama set. I used to say that Clara was like a creation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's, with her breathy voice, doll-like appearance and slightly nervous disposition. But then, I hated the thought of her having been created by a borderline misogynistic white male, so I decided that she was a Jane Austen character. It suited, since she had a look and manner that made people instantly assume that she was stupid, which she'd tease for a while by staying silent throughout a heavy conversation, until suddenly piping up with something far more insightful and informative than anyone else had come near to. I lived for those moments.

I threw the duvet away from my own bare flesh. I liked to sleep naked, because when I woke up, for a split second, my brain would be tricked into thinking that I'd slept with someone and I'd get a small fraction of an adrenaline rush. It also made me feel thinner. I climbed out of bed, feeling dense, like my insides had all expanded within the frame of my body from the rum. I put on a pair of the Marks and Spencer cotton briefs that I'd bought in bulk the year before, when I'd finally learnt that I wasn't obliged to wear overpriced lacy thongs that cut a line from rectum to clitoris for my whole life, and wandered out into the flat.

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Every morning, emerging into the homeliness of that place, I felt both grateful to be there and fearful of the day that I wouldn't. Though I'd only ever lived in a flat owned by Clara's family, for a token donation of rent money, I knew how much it cost to live in London and felt an anxious flutter whenever I thought of what I could afford in real-life circumstances. I dreaded the time I'd be holed up in a shoebox alongside the motorway.

A few rooms away, the loud and powerful rush of the shower began. Clara was starting the day like a responsible adult. Meanwhile, I meandered into the kitchen, where I found the ash of a mini pizza in the oven. I had a vague recollection of putting it in there when I'd arrived home, but, clearly, no recollection of taking it out. Sheepishly, I used an oven mitt to remove the tray and ran the singed circle under the cold tap. Then I reached for a small Moroccan glass on the shelf above, filling it with a sachet of Dioralyte and water from the Brita filter. I stirred until it turned murky pearl then downed the whole thing in one go. Honestly, I felt brighter within seconds.

Dioralyte is a fantastic creation.

I don't remember exactly when I met Clara, only that she became a reoccurring fixture of my life, in the way that you only accept when you're very young. We were six years old, according to the date that my mother began working for her mother.

It was a year after we'd moved over from Israel. My mother had just given birth to Ezra, my half-brother, whose father we had followed across the ocean just in case my mother had a chance with him. Turned out, she didn't, but thanks to the British passport that she had acquired when she was briefly

married to *my* father – I was the product of post-divorce copulation – we got to live in a one-bedroom flat in Earl’s Court, and enjoy the pleasure of a London winter with no central heating, during which time I was forced to spend every Shabbat with my father and his ancient parents, so that I wouldn’t be forgotten in their will.

And then my mother met Bella Mortimer at a life-drawing class. When they recounted the story, they claimed to have instantly bonded over Clara and I – their daughters, exactly the same age – and a shared love of culture. What I had since gathered to be the truth was that my mother divulged her situation – two kids, two absent fathers, no money, no family in London – and Bella, a vulture of a rescuer, swooped in. She had just started a charity venture getting underprivileged children off the streets and into the arts. On the spot, she offered my mother a job – flippantly, I’d always imagined: ‘Oh well, you must come work with me. What fun!’

From that day on, it’s difficult to recall a childhood memory that did not, in some way, involve the Mortimers.

Bella was not an obvious match for my Jewish immigrant mother. She came from an eccentric, upper-class family, who believed in free love and forgetting to bath your children – ‘Aristo-bohemia,’ my mother called it, with a touch of derision. She was vibrant, provocative and vulgar, while my mother was something of a prude. Her husband, Derrick Mortimer, was a bald-headed New Yorker – ‘bald man syndrome’ my mother would say in reference to anything he did – and a world-renowned architect who spent most of his life travelling. He wore thick-rimmed spectacles and loved talking about his wine and art collections.

I don’t remember the first occasion that Clara and I were

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thrown together. I don't remember if there was any resistance, or if we fitted together like two pieces of a jagged-edged puzzle, or if we had, for survival purposes, decided to become best friends the very first time we'd met. I just remembered hours spent on top of a pink Wendy house and tents made out of sheets, draped over Clara's four-poster bed. I remembered the two of us sardined alongside Bella, as she sat up in bed, with a glass of red wine on the bedside table and the bottle next to it, intermittently getting up to smoke out of the window. I remembered begging Clara's older brother Fabian to let us play with him and hiding from Ezra, whom I'd felt disconnected from since the day my mother gave birth to him and he commandeered all of her emotional resources. I remembered Bella tucking a napkin into my neckline, because I was such a messy eater, while she could barely get Clara to eat anything at all. I remembered all these little things that had, over the years, stitched me into the fabric of their family.

My mother worked for Bella's venture for nearly seven years. She managed volunteers and liaised with the endless stream of freelancers that Bella brought on to avoid setting up anything that resembled a real company. My mother never dealt directly with the underprivileged kids – whom Bella often invited to camp out in the house when things got rough at home – because she said she didn't feel comfortable with them. She did attend the committee meetings made up of Bella's overprivileged friends, whom she couldn't admit she felt equally uncomfortable among. Bella must have paid her more generously than one would normally expect to earn at a charity because, suddenly, she no longer asked me to pocket loo roll from school when we'd run out. Suddenly, we were the kind of people who ate at the local Italian restaurant on

multiple evenings and got bought new clothes when old ones became hole-ridden. Not only was I no longer forced to Shabbat, but my mother did everything she could to prevent me from going, to dig the knife in with my father, who was now the one begging for more time with me.

My mother didn't know how to cook, which I realized later in life was because she didn't eat. So, we spent most meal-times at the Mortimers' in those years, though my mother always found a reason to opt out if Derrick was around. His moods were too unpredictable for her anxiety levels to cope with. Sometimes, he'd arrive at the table with a great smile on his face and tell a story that would have everyone doubled over in hysterics. Other times, he'd sit with heavy eyebrows, barely saying a word, unless it was a complaint about the food. Everyone would tiptoe around him on those occasions – everyone except Bella, who seemed to become even more vociferous than she usually was. We'd all chew through the tension, hoping he'd ignore her, like he sometimes did, rather than erupt and call her 'one hell of a cunt', as more often happened.

I was used to fractured marriages, but my own parents' understated, calculated animosity seemed so minor compared to Bella and Derrick's theatrical fights. I have an early memory of two male police officers in the entrance hall of the Mortimers' house, accusing Bella of the theft and vandalism of Derrick Mortimer's car and ordering her away from the property. Clara and I watched from the top of the stairs as Bella laughed and calmly stripped every piece of clothing from her body. She stood there stark naked, tall and spindly like a black widow spider, shouting, 'Come on, arrest me, boys!' at the blushing policemen. Fabian stayed in his room, as he always did when drama occurred, and Clara cried hysterically, while I

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squeezed my arms around her tiny shoulders. But, as terrifying as it was, even at the age of seven, I thought it was the most fantastic thing I'd ever seen a person do. I didn't know at the time that she needn't have done it, since the police would never have arrested her once they found out that she and Derrick were married. I just saw someone who was so unafraid.

Things changed for our extended family set-up thanks to the mammoth marital argument that happened when Clara and I were eleven. It occurred in the middle of the night and had culminated in Bella getting into her car and driving away. The next day, hours passed with no word from her. And then hours turned into days. My mother wanted to call the police, but Derrick refused to let her. After a week, Bella's sister arrived from the country with her own daughter, to look after Clara and Fabian. And finally, after three weeks, Bella returned and whisked her traumatized children off to Disneyland Paris, as if nothing had happened. Where she went for those weeks, or why, I had never discovered, and Clara had not talked about it since.

My mother had been so furious with Bella that they didn't speak for a long time, even when working in the same small office. Soon after, my mother's job no longer existed. She returned to long days at home in the mustiness of a cluttered flat, caring for me and my brother, who was having a hard time learning and making friends. It also meant that she needed to return to her unhealthily entangled relationship with my father, whom she'd been separated from for twelve years, begging him to get her out of debt, promising him more time with me, though she didn't have the same agency over how I spent my Friday nights anymore, so Shabbat was out of the question.

Through all of it, however, I stayed closely enveloped in the

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Mortimer fold. I continued to spend my evenings and weekends at their kitchen table and was invited on all the family holidays. Bella continued to treat me like one of her own children. Clara remained the closest thing in the world to me.

I'd always wondered if I would have grown up with a completely different personality and outlook on the world if my mother hadn't gone to life drawing that day. Maybe I would have started accompanying her to synagogue on Friday nights when that suddenly became a thing for her and embraced my many-blooded heritage. Maybe I would have learnt how to save money to do the things I'd always wanted to do and not just the things that I happened into. Maybe I'd have cultivated a relationship with my own brother, made more of an effort with my father and felt like I had strong roots of my own.

Maybe – but the truth is, we'll never know.