



Snoring.

That's the first thing I hear. Loud snoring, followed by the realisation that I'm the only person in the room so it has to be me. Outside, wood pigeons coo and sparrows chirp, but I've just managed to wake myself up with the machine-gun rattling of my floppy air cavities.

Hot stuff, Faith Valentine.

Eyes shut, I unstick my furry tongue with a *clack*. Then I sit up, yawn with breath like forgotten laundry, swig from a glass on my bedside table and promptly spit melted toothpaste and paprika all over my duvet.

Stuck to the bottom of the glass:

*Bet your intestines are super PERKY now
LOL. Max xxx*



With a small grimace – my brother needs a hobby – I open my curtains. Sunlight streams in; I sleepily swing my legs to the floor, scratch my knee and turn the radio on. Then I head straight to my mat.

There’s an entire six-metre wall of glass covering one side of my bedroom – in this light, my pores look like potholes: you could get a rope and a tiny hard hat and climb down into one of them – so I quickly unfocus my eyes and grab hold of the wooden barre. Then I bend my knees deeply.

Lifting my heels off the floor, I yawn through my nostrils and gesture to the side with my left hand: *grand plié*. Flatten my foot and hold my leg up and back: arabesque. A single-leg *relevé* to stretch my foot. *A la sec*—

I’m going to have to step up my exfoliation routine or Grandma’s going to kill me.

Battement fondu, battement frappé; quatrième devant.

Perhaps we could just use Polyfilla?

Gliss—

‘Coming up,’ an overexcited woman on the radio trills, ‘the latest hit by Noah Anthony! This one’s got *all* the romantic feels, hitting me right in the chest cav.’

‘Yeah,’ a guy deadpans. ‘I’m, like, a mess.’

‘My heart’s all over the floor!’ she agrees, neatly ignoring his sarcasm. ‘And here it is! The UK’s newest Number One, pouring straight from our ears into yours!’

I stop mid-spin. What does that even *mean*?

With a quick leap, I make it to the radio just in time to catch the opening guitar chords. Guilt tugging at me, I turn the volume down before my boyfriend starts *mmmmmming* and *do-do-doing*.

Sorry, baby. Love you.

Then – hamstrings still tight from yesterday – I head back to my mat, breathe deeply, close my eyes, stretch upwards, touch my toes and then plank peacefully for a few minutes. Pushing further up, I arrange myself into a deep V shape: feet and arms on the floor, head hanging down, knees flexing and—

‘You’re a total freak, Effie. You know that, right?’

I open my eyes. My big sister’s face is thirty centimetres from mine, lying on the floor, directly below me. She must have silently slipped in and squiggled under my downward dog.

‘Something’s definitely wrong with you,’ Mercy

continues, dead-pan. ‘Do you think it’s, like, medical, or psychological, or genetic, or just the latent impact of a general cultural inequality? I’m legit curious.’

Mer’s so close I can see the fibres of her mascara.

There’s melted black eyeliner streaking from each corner of her eyes towards her hairline as if she’s wearing a mask, her foundation is separating around her nose and her lips are patchy with what was burgundy lipstick. The short pink wig she’s wearing is slightly knotted and wonky, the fringe lopsided.

My sister looks defiant and exhausted. My heart twangs.

‘Good morning,’ I say, leaning down and kissing her slightly greasy forehead. ‘How was the party? What poor yet totally suspecting soul did you make cry this time?’

Then I stand up, take a long step forward and perform a wide lunge over my sister’s reclining black-Lycra’d body.

‘Oh my God,’ Mercy snaps crossly. ‘*Stop exercising on me.*’

She shuffles across the wooden floor, sliming up

and on to my bed one muscle at a time like a disgruntled deep-sea creature.

‘Hell, *no*,’ she adds, punching the OFF button on my radio. ‘I’m not listening to your basic boyfriend’s lame warbling, either. Nuh-uh.’

I frown at her. ‘*Mercy*.’

‘What? Oh, please. He sucks at writing music and you know it.’ She scowls at the light. ‘And you can turn *that* off too.’

‘The sun?’ I pirouette carefully.

‘Yes.’ Mer watches me spin in disgust. ‘It’s doing my head in. As are you, Faith Valentine. Stop being so bendy and twisty. It’s not even six am. Such a psycho.’

Then – ritual insults completed – Mer puts an arm over her face, closes her dark eyes and picks up snoring where I just left off, vibrating like a drill into a solid brick wall.

I watch my big sister, angry even in her sleep.

Sometimes I think of my bed as a timeshare, like a cheap flat in Majorca. I get the night, and my seventeen-year-old sibling gets the 5am till 2pm post-party slot. I’m not completely convinced *Mercy* even remembers where her own bed is. There’s only

a year between us, but if I ever locked my door I'm pretty sure she'd just curl up and sleep on a damp towel in the hallway like a puppy.

Gently – well, quite gently – I pull my minty-paprika duvet over her. Then I refill the glass with non-Maxified water, put it back on the table and step out of my white silk shorts and cami. Hopping, I tug on neon-green leggings and an orange T-shirt. Carefully – God forbid I crush them – I tie my curls into a loose bun, then tug on a cap and sunglasses.

Finally, I lace up my trainers, click on my fitness monitor and slip out of the room. For a moment, I pause in the hallway.

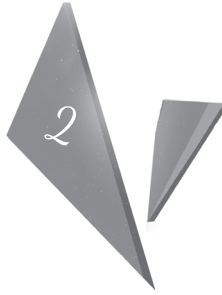
Hope is making cute squeaking sounds – no ugly drilling noises for my little sister – Max is still out as usual and, at the far end of the huge corridor, Mum's door (and the door next to it) is pointedly shut. Noah was playing Wembley last night and Dad is on a flight here from California: they're both definitely unconscious too.

Which means – I take a long, deep breath and stretch – everybody in my life is fast asleep and everything the sun touches is mine. Today is important, and as soon as the rest of the world

wakes up I'm going to have to be at my brightest, shiniest, most utterly flawless.

I'll have to be Faith Valentine. But I've got two hours left before that happens.

I'm going for a run.



What kind of sports car does a cat drive?

A Furr-ari.

I'm nobody when I run.

When I run, I'm not a Valentine or a girlfriend or a big sister or a little sister; I'm not a daughter or a granddaughter; I'm not Fitty Number Eleven or a movie-star-in-the-making or The One To Watch or a *girl on the verge of womanhood* (vomit).

I'm not the inspiration for a love song.

As I pound down the long driveway and through the electronic gates – as sweat starts to collect on my top lip like a tiny, salty moustache – I begin to disappear into the familiar, piston-like in-and-out of my lungs.

Richmond Park is so beautiful at dawn. Damp

and rose-gold, the path winds round the huge lake, past the ducks – partying in the early sunshine – and the white swans gliding blankly towards nothing.

I speed up, enjoying the burn in my legs, the heat in my chest and the sweat soaking into my T-shirt. Grimacing slightly – better crack out the razor as soon as I get home or my prickly underarms are going to get their very own headlines – I take a right turn and run even harder. I pump my arms back and forth, keeping my head down and—

‘Faith Valentine?’

Not yet not yet not—

‘Faith? Faith Valentine? It is, isn’t it?’

A boy is jogging next to me, acne shimmering in the sunshine. He jumps forward and leans round so he can peer under the brim of my cap, breathing right into my face.

Why does he smell of prawn-cocktail crisps? At 6am?

‘Nope,’ I say, pulling my cap down and running faster. ‘Sorry, I think you’ve got the wrong person.’

‘I haven’t,’ he insists cheerfully, speeding up too.

‘You’re Effie Valentine. I read that you run every morning and you live in this area, so I got up super early for a whole week in a row and caught the Piccadilly then the District to Richmond and here you are!’

He’s running casually alongside me, as if we’re voluntary jogging partners discussing tricky daily commutes.

Quickly, I weigh up my options. I could *probably* run faster – although I’m more of a long-distance type – or I could stop, but that might look like an invitation to chat. Or I could dive off the path into the trees, but that’s definitely one of the most idiotic suggestions I’ve ever given myself.

Instead, I veer subtly across the grass so we’re headed back towards the main path. I don’t want to hurt his feelings.

‘I can’t believe it’s you!’ the boy continues chirpily. He can only be about thirteen. Why isn’t he playing video games or missing the toilet bowl while he pees or something? ‘This is awesome! Wow, I was right, you *are* really hot. I mean, like, naturally, you know? Not a smidge of make-up. That’s my favourite kind of hot.’

His favourite *kind* of hot? As if there are multiple genres of hotness available to a prepubescent boy with a ripe pimple between his eyebrows.

‘Thank you.’ I smile. ‘That’s so sweet.’

‘Do you come here often? This exact route, I mean?’ He lankily matches my pace. ‘Also, what are your feelings about parks in general?’

‘Umm.’ This must be some new, obscure kind of flirting. ‘I don’t run this route normally, no.’ *This route is now dead to me.* ‘And, mmm, parks are . . . nice?’

‘Nice!’ The boy sounds thrilled. A quick glance around. ‘So what’s your favourite . . . tree?’

‘Oak.’ I’m well trained in quick-fire questions, which is good because I’m not even properly awake yet.

‘Favourite food?’

Cornish pasty. ‘Sushi.’

‘Colour?’

Grey. ‘Green.’

‘Epic!’ We’re still running pretty fast and a drip of sweat runs off the end of his chin. ‘Can I have your autograph, then?’ A Sharpie is thrust under my nose. ‘You can write on my arm!’

Stopping, I put a hand on my waist, wipe my forehead and grab the pen with my damp hand.

Faith V—

‘All my love,’ he prompts. ‘Write all my love.’

All my love, Faith Valentine.

Then he shoves an arm round me, tugs me into his Lynx-saturated side, plasters wet lips to my cheek and holds a phone up in front of our sweaty faces. My stomach lurches: there’s a little red light flashing at the top: 4:36, 4:37, 4:38—

He wasn’t flirting with me. This was an *interview*.

‘And *you*,’ the boy announces to the camera, making an awkward T with his free hand, ‘have just been T-zoned!’ He beams at me triumphantly. ‘Thanks for the exclusive, Eff. Eleven *schmeven*. You’re *my* Number One! Or, like, Number Two. Behind Lily Aldridge. She’s a Victoria’s Secret Angel and I’m going to marry her.’

And he’s off, running back into the trees.

I may need to rethink my exercise routine.

Maybe I should get up earlier, start at 4am instead. I could sprint in circles round the lake in

our garden. If only running on the treadmill in our basement gym didn't make me feel like a giant neon hamster.

Pushing through the front door, I wipe my forehead, check the time, then pick my phone up off the table. It's already flashing with notifications and Google alerts.

Stretching, I send Noah his daily wake-up text.

Morning, handsome! How did the show go? I watched some on YouTube last night – it looked amazing! So proud of you xxxx

Then, loosening my shoulders, I email my agent:

Hi, Persephone! Thanks for the update! Is this the last version of the script or will there be another one? x

Mum:

Can I fix you any breakfast? How about some nice healthy porridge? Let me know! xx

Dad:

What's your ETA? Need me to leave you a key? Can't wait to see you xxx

Max:

Where are you? You OK? xx

The morning feels like it's unravelling already, so I drop to the floor of the hallway for thirty push-ups. Thirty crouch-star-jumps. Thirty lifts on a nearby chair. Twenty-seven squats with weights above my head (I'll squeeze in the last three after brushing my teeth).

Grabbing my phone, I open today's messages from Genevieve, my grandmother's assistant. The first photo is of a bright green smoothie bowl with a gold spoon on a marble worktop, raspberries and coconut shavings in a beautifully arranged heart shape. It's been filtered to look rosy and nostalgic.

I bet it tastes like the contents of a lawnmower bag.

Frowning, I copy and paste:

Nothing starts the day like a full heart (and tummy)! Good morning, lovelies :) ♥ ♥ xxx

And . . . POST.

Then I steal a rubbery slice of Mercy's cold takeaway pizza from a box on the kitchen table, wolf it down and burp greasily as I climb the stairs. At the top, I quickly scribble my cat joke down on a Post-it and cock my head to the side. *Furr-ari/Ferrari*. Is that funny? I think it's quite funny. Cats can't even drive! LOL.

Finally, I slip into the empty room, kiss the Post-it and stick it on the wall. *Done*. Then I glance at my watch and breathe out slowly: 8.23am.

Just one more thing left to do.