



ALL THE
INVISIBLE
THINGS

Orlaagh Collins

BLOOMSBURY

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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Prologue

My name is Helvetica.

Like the font.

Whenever I tell people this I wait for them to make the face: the one where their features freeze like they're hoping they misheard, then they realise *nope, she's for real* and they look sorry, like it's their fault. I bet Dad thought my name would make me sound interesting (graphic designers think stuff like this, I swear!). I was probably like some branding exercise and he just did it to make me stand out but in a good way. And he wasn't to know how different I'd feel already. My little sister, Arial, gets away with it because she sounds like the Disney mermaid, which I used to think was so unfair, but I'm relieved for her now. Mum must have been high on that baby gas to let Dad away with it. But, like, twice?

Pez never made the face.

PART ONE

Back to London, back to me

1

We're all in Shakeaway sheltering from the rain and I'm scanning the menu high up on the wall, eyes flitting over the milkshake options. I've whittled it down, toying between Reese's Cups and Rhubarb & Custards, when I realise Jess is talking.

'I'll order,' she says, lolloping off towards the till. 'It's a going-away treat.'

Liv counts out change on the counter beside me, already slurping her Strawberry Laces and Starmix blend. She always has the same, like Freya, who has a large Kinder Bueno straight-up every time.

'Must be exciting,' Liv says. 'I'd give anything to be moving to London.'

I try to smile but it's hard to hide the other feelings I have about going back and my cheeks flash hot. I'm prone to a violent reddening of face, neck and even my ears, often at the same time. Freya steps left, checking herself in the mirror behind my head. 'Still doesn't feel real that you won't be with us for sixth form. I mean, who am I going to copy my French prep off now?' she says, fanning a fistful of blonde locks over her eyes as she and Liv study her

reflection, trying to see what she might look like with a fringe. I'm pretty sure I'm not meant to answer so I pretend to search for something deep in my bag.

'Two Oreos with crushed Aero Mint bubbles,' the guy behind the counter says, landing two more cups with an impressive thud. According to Jess, Shakeaway has two rival taste camps: fruity or chocolatey, and you can only be a true fan of one. She thinks Liv is alone in the fruit camp and it's me, her and Freya in chocolate. Really, I'm there for both. Isn't everyone? I tip my cup off Jess's by way of a *thank you* and we clatter some stools to our usual high table by the window.

'Photo!' she says, reaching her arm out. 'Last Shakeaway with all of us together.'

Liv rolls her eyes. 'She's going to Camden. Not Cambodia!'

Jess ignores this and nudges us to raise our cups like she's doing. I have to stand on my toes to tilt my head next to hers and she snaps away until she's happy and my face hurts. I haul myself back on to my stool, bending over the sticky tabletop to sip my drink. 'I've tagged you,' she says, handing me the phone. It's a cute picture but my smile looks strange. A bit like this shake; it's nice but there's an aftertaste I can't put my finger on, vaguely similar to a kids' toothpaste I bought for Ariel once. I take another sip to see how bad it is and when I look up Liv is pressing her face against the window.

'Check it out,' she says, tapping the glass. 'Mrs Richardson is outside the bank, with a man!'

Jess squints across the street. 'Think you'll find that's her husband.'

Freya leans in too. 'Richardson was easily the least awful of our form teachers.'

Liv makes a face. 'She said I was trouble.'

Jess shoves her shoulder. 'You *were* trouble! She threw you out of her SRE class in Year Nine. Remember?'

Liv folds her arms across her chest. 'I wasn't thrown out,' she says. 'I had to stand at the front. And all I did was ask a question.'

In the boys' sex-ed they get to discuss the fun stuff like actually doing it, so how's it fair that all we talk about is blood and STIs? That was Liv's question. I'll never forget because when I pointed out that boys can get STIs too, Richardson thought I was being cheeky and sent me to stand beside Liv in front of the whiteboard. 'Far as I recall she got through our entire sex-ed without even uttering the word *vagina*. Not once!' Liv's voice is loud and a man behind us looks up from wiping his toddler's mouth. 'She was way more comfortable with the word *penis*,' she says, more quietly. 'Preferred the feel of it inside her mouth, I reckon.'

Jess takes the lid off her shake and stabs at a stubborn rock of Oreo. 'What was it she called down there again?' she says, waving the now dented plastic spoon over her lap.

Freya hooshes her stool in. '*Intimate female area?*'

'That was it!' Jess says.

Liv grabs her cup and speaks into it like a microphone. 'Girls, today we're going to talk about reproductive health and sex-sue-al relations.' She's got Richardson's voice exactly down and it's impossible not to laugh. 'By that I mean, how to avoid touching any genitals whatsoever outside of marriage.'

‘Stop!’ Jess says, bouncing on her chair. ‘I’ve got a wet patch going on here.’

Richardson might have failed at sex-ed, but Freya’s right – she was far from an awful teacher. When I arrived in Year 8 just weeks after Mum died, she left me alone and let me thaw in my own time, which to be honest felt kind.

Liv is at full volume again. ‘*And* it’s not like boys are the only ones with any genitals so how come they only ever talk about boys doing it?’ Everyone is laughing now and I’d join in only I seem to have missed the beginning of this particular rant and I’m not one hundred per cent clear what she means.

‘Doing what?’ I ask. Freya sticks her tongue in her cheek and makes a pretty unmistakable hand gesture. I force a smile. ‘You mean ... masturbating?’ The word lands awkwardly and this makes them crack up even more. I take a noisy slurp of my shake, kicking myself for opening my mouth as a reverse avalanche of freezing cold ice cream shoots down my throat. The brain freeze is so sharp I have to squeeze my eyes shut. When it finally subsides, I cautiously open them.

Liv leans closer. ‘Yes, Helvetica, mastur-bayy-shun,’ she says, in Mrs Richardson mode again. ‘Feel free to share any personal experience with the class. We’re all ears.’ I twiddle my straw, making some face back at her. She’s looks like she’s about to take a sip when she sits up. ‘OK, real talk,’ she says, looking around. ‘Say you’re at home, alone in your room, and like ... testing your batteries or whatever, just say ... who you do you fantasise about?’ She glares at each of us. For a moment no one speaks and I scan the table. Jess sinks

into her seat, cup raised to her mouth, but Freya looks like she's really thinking about it.

'Jamie,' Freya says, after a while.

'He'll be thrilled that took you so long,' Liv says. 'But Jamie doesn't count on account of the real-life sex you're having with him.'

Freya peers up from under her lashes. 'Um, we haven't actually gone *that* far.'

'Whatever,' Liv says, 'I said *fantasise*,' then she turns to Jess, who is opening her mouth, but Liv quickly raises her hand. 'I swear, Jess, if you mention that Timothee Chalamet one more time, I'm reconsidering our friendship.'

Jess laughs and Liv moves on to me. 'Vetty, I'm counting on you now for some real juice.' Her eyes are locked on mine and I know I should just blurt out an answer but the last time I did this it nearly changed everything. Admittedly, it was in Year 8 on a sleepover at Freya's house and Liv wasn't even there, but still. I wish I could be like them and joke about this stuff but it's as though nothing I've said since sounds convincing.

I shrug. 'No one in particular.'

'C'mon!' Liv says. Everyone is looking at me. This could be my worst nightmare. 'They don't even have to be famous. Like, how about that Pez guy? He'd count.'

I groan inwardly. 'Pez is just a friend.'

'An attractive *friend* as I recall,' she says, reaching for my phone. 'There's that picture of him somewhere ... wearing a cap.' Liv and Freya peer over her shoulders, staring at the screen while she scrolls. I don't have to look. It's Pez and his dad on a red carpet somewhere. Thankfully his mum isn't in

the photo or her fans would have shared it all over the internet. Me and Pez still follow each other and stuff, but neither of us really post much now. Liv's hand flies up. 'Here it is!' she says, tilting the phone in the light before shoving it towards me. Then she leans closer. 'I've said it before but that boy is welcome to watch *Vampire Diaries* on my couch anytime,' she says, writhing about making some kind of sex noises.

This is just one of the reasons I don't really mention Pez any more. None of the girls know how close we really were, and I sit back, almost enjoying how wrong they are about all of it. Lying on the couch watching TV all weekend is exactly the type of thing Pez and I would do. Well, it's exactly what we *used* to do. Just completely not in the way Liv thinks.

Freya stops laughing and taps her hand on the table. 'I've always wanted to ask,' she says. 'Is his nickname Pez because of those sweets? The ones with the Mickey Mouse dispenser things—'

'I had one of those!' Jess cuts in. 'But Hello Kitty.'

'His real name is Peregrine.' It's been a while since I said Pez's full name out loud and though it sounds unusual, I'm not sure why I ever kept it a secret.

Freya is trying hard to keep a straight face. 'Like the bird of prey?'

I think about mentioning the lesser-known Marvel character Pez once told me about but I just nod. 'He never liked it.'

Liv looks like she's already worked this out. 'Peregrine and Helvetica?' she says, barely able to contain herself. 'Dead

heat for *Meanest Parents Award* that year. No wonder you two found each other.'

I've often thought about how our names brought us together. Like, if I'd been called Liv or Jess would it have been the same? Would Pez have let me ride on the back of his BMX or taught me how to play Perudo when we were stuck inside on account of my broken arm? Would he have cried with me when Thomas J gets stung by the bees in *My Girl*? Would he have held my hand under the willow tree when the doctors found Mum's grapefruit? Liv pushes her cup forward and places both elbows on the table. 'Things could be different now,' she says, eyebrows up. 'You're not kids any more.' Without meaning to, I make the kind of face Ariel gives me when I say something she thinks is ridiculous. 'Unless,' she says, her voice softer than it's been all day and possibly ever. 'You don't feel that way ... about boys.'

The table shakes. 'Ouch!' Liv says, spinning her shoulders around to Jess, who is glaring at her. My mouth fills with water, that way it does when you're about to be sick, and I set my cup down as casually as I can, but the shake blender behind the counter stops whirring and all eyes weigh heavy on mine in the new silence. Liv isn't exactly known for her subtlety, but *this*? 'Sorry,' she says, even more gently. 'I'm just saying you shouldn't feel weird, if you're not into guys.' Her hand creeps across the table towards mine. 'We're cool about it.' She stops and does something silly with her mouth. 'Well, I'm cool as long as *I'm* the one you fancy, obviously.'

The table trembles again. 'God, Liv!' says Jess, her eyes slatted in anger.

Liv frowns. 'What?'

‘If and *when* Vetty wants to talk about ... *this*,’ Jess says, lowering her voice. ‘That’s up to her.’

Liv sits back. ‘Well, she leaves tomorrow and I think it might help.’ Then she looks at me. ‘Get it off your chest, you know?’ Her eyes are wide and earnest, like she genuinely believes this is a good idea. Jess looks like she’s afraid I might cry, which I might. Freya looks confused.

‘Um, hello?’ she says. ‘Vetty went out with Arthur for, like ... months. She was mad about him.’ Arthur is Freya’s cousin. He sat beside me on the bus on the way to her house at Christmas time of Year 8, a month after the awkward sleepover from hell. I was chatting away when he reached over mid-sentence and casually fixed my smudged eyeliner. He was dry and funny and when he laughed he had this squint and his shoulders shook violently but he made absolutely no noise. He was sweet and turned out to be a really nice kisser. We only broke up because he moved back to Birmingham that summer.

I move my hands under the table, clenching my fists tight. I may have less than twenty-four hours left in Somerset but I still can’t do this. I grit my teeth, then slam a hand against my chest. ‘You got me, Liv! I’ve been dreaming about you in that panda bear onesie of yours for so long; waiting to find the right moment to tell you!’ I think I’m doing a good job of sounding all theatrical but the girls stare like they’re not entirely sure whether or not I’m joking. OK, so, this is worse than saying *masturbation* out loud.

Jess looks at her watch, then shoves her stool out. ‘I better get going,’ she says, flashing me a quick *are you OK?* look as

she slings her jacket over her shoulder. 'Vetty, you must be heading that way?'

'Just a sec,' I say, freeing my bag from the leg of my stool.

I get through the goodbyes and promises to keep in touch but it's only outside in the fresh air that I properly exhale. Jess arrives by my side and we stroll silently over the bridge towards town. Outside the Co-op, I slow down and something must happen to my face because she looks guilty, making my chest even tighter. 'I didn't say anything,' she says. 'You know? To Liv.'

My spine stiffens. The queasy feeling in my stomach isn't the Aero Mint bubbles. 'I was just going to ... say thanks. That's all.'

She looks relieved and places her hand on my shoulder. 'Anytime, Vetty,' she says, and we walk on up the hill.

Please, god, let this stuff be easier in London.

2

Still nine but a Coke can taller, Pez arrived like a gift just for me. It was the evening of my tenth birthday and I was allowed to go to the Tesco Metro on my own. This was a treat and I was excited. Mum sat outside our flat on St Agnes Villas holding her watch and I had a sense something big was about to happen, I just wasn't sure what. I thought about saying something important to her, like telling her I loved her, because you know ... alien abductions, murderers and stuff, but I must have decided that Mum already knew how I felt, because I took off without a word.

'I'm timing you,' she cried, and I pounded the pavement all the way there, like she knew I would. I ran even faster than the cars that heaved along on Camden Road in the heavy heat. Bursting through Tesco's sliding doors, I crashed past the security guard and managed to topple the tower of wire baskets beside him. Before I could apologise, I had to stop and catch my breath. I was bent double like this, hands on knees, when I spotted Luna Boyd at the checkout, talking to the lady behind the till and waving her hand elegantly like she was conducting the sound of her own voice. Luna was hands down Mum and Dad's favourite

actress on the telly, but it wasn't her I was taken with. Behind her in the queue stood a boy, blowing a bubble of gum from his mouth that grew and grew until it was so humungous it covered almost all of his face. I snatched a bag of Tangfastics from the rack, watching as he turned for the door, Mars Milk under his arm and magnificent pink gum balloon still intact. He moved spry and quick, like our neighbour's cat coming down the pipes. His eyes met mine as he passed, and he was almost at the door when his bubble finally popped! When I gasped, he spun around and I stared helplessly back until a smile cracked from underneath his cap, lighting me up like a newly struck match. His front teeth were only half-grown.

In a puff, he was gone.

I looked at the line snaking towards the tills and I knew I hadn't that kind of time. My fist opened inside my pocket and the coins slid back inside. I was out of the door, back into the traffic before I could think. I weaved across the forecourt towards Camden Road, panicking not about the stolen sweets under my arm, but that I'd lost him. As soon as I turned left my heart surged. Luna walked ahead, hips swaying in her denims, and the boy, on a bike now, free-wheeling down the road just metres behind her, dragging the toes of his bright red high-tops along the ground. I galloped to catch up until the same short distance between him and Luna was all that was left between us. Seconds later she went left towards the square and in less time again the wheels of his BMX veered around the corner too.

He pedalled along the footpath in front, bouncing down the kerb and narrowly dodging the huge truck that gusted

out from the mews. On he went, slinky and unbothered like one of Old Giles's cats once more, clattering his empty bottle against the iron railings of the playground, left hand thud, thud, thudding against the bars as he went. I was sure someone famous like Luna would turn left for one of the smart houses overlooking the square but she walked on and the boy and his bike followed, bumping down the kerb in front and soon up another. I walked faster, shadowing him so closely that I could hear his gum bursts: pop, pop, pop. All of a sudden, we'd reached the bottom of my road. My feet stopped by the bank of recycling bins because the spokes of his wheels had finally stopped. He spun around, his short, straight eyebrows sitting far up from his eyes, tilting at me like a cartoon. I counted the little lines cracked into his forehead as he squinted into the evening sun: one, two, three, four.

'Gonna tell me your name?' he said, licking the slack gum from his lips and tucking it back into his mouth with his tongue.

I opened my mouth to speak, heart hammering against my ribs like his Mars Milk bottle off the railings. 'Helvetica.' I blurted it out and braced myself for the face people usually make. My teeth were clenched and ready, but the face didn't come. Instead another pale pink balloon erupted and collapsed on to his nose, then he flicked the chewed gum into a nearby bin and bobbed his head kind of slow, like he could see everything I was feeling.

'Cool,' he said, that was all, but with this one word I knew we were going to be friends. Then he wheeled in closer. 'Peregrine.' He whispered his name slowly, lifting

one hand from the handlebar and extending it towards me.

I repeated his name. ‘Pear-eh-grin.’

‘If you ever call me that, we’re done though. Yeah?’ he said, his brown eyes newly serious.

As he reached a sticky hand towards me, I nodded, and unsure what else to do, I began to shake it.

‘Easy!’ he said, whipping his hand back. ‘I was only going in for a sour cherry.’ Then he wiped his hand on his jeans like mine had germs before reaching for my bag of Tangfastics again. ‘D’you pay for these sweets, Helvetica?’ My head moved up and down before I could think, but he sniffed the air the way Dad sniffs Vicks; sort of quick, like he knew the truth.

‘So, what am I supposed to call you?’ I asked.

‘It’s Pez,’ he said, watching me even more carefully as he shoved himself backwards across the street. I stared until he hit the parked cars on the other side, directly outside the blue house almost opposite our flat; the one which until yesterday had a SOLD sign stuck in its garden. ‘See you round,’ he called out, dragging his bike up on to the kerb.

‘Vetty,’ I shouted after him. ‘Everyone calls me Vetty.’

Without turning around, he raised the fingers of his left hand in a peace sign and clambered up the steps towards his new front door. I waved up at Mum, who stood out from the pavement, staring at the same house across the street, watching the door that Luna Boyd had walked through moments earlier.

Those sweets never tasted right but I didn’t mind because from that day onwards having a best friend was no longer a

theoretical fantasy I'd read about in books or seen on TV. I had a real-life one right across the street and for the first time ever it felt as though I'd plugged right into life. Things started to fit and some even made sense. With Pez, I was more than the nervous *me* I was at school, I was the all the fun *me's* inside my head too, because, for some reason I never stopped to try to understand, he didn't seem to care which version turned up outside his door.

Aunt Wendy arrived from Somerset wheeling my birthday present out of her van the next weekend. It was a shiny green racing bike and my eyes pricked with tears as I read the card. *Go, Vetty, go!* it said, and go I did. Term had started again but me and Pez spent every hour not at school tearing around those streets. The nasty twins in my class mattered less and less, and then, when life couldn't get any better, the weekends came around and our days felt endless. We'd get tired cycling and climb the white willow in Camden Square and drink Mars Milk and suck Tangfastics until our tongues burned. Before we knew it, it was summer again and we carved our names in the bark of our tree and this little den we shared felt like the centre of the universe.

For four years we raced the wind along the canal to the best-ever chip shop up at Tufnell Park, to the tennis courts off York Way, whizzing around the market stalls, over the cobbled bridge at Camden Lock, past the pretty houseboats, back up the canal again and home in time for tea. On days when we felt lazy we'd lie on our backs and sing songs, or rate our favourite sweets out of ten, and if it was wet, we'd move to the couch and watch *Super 8* or *Kick-Ass* and when we got sick of these, we'd stick on one of Mum's old

DVDs: *Big*, *Stand by Me* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. We'd watch them over and over again until we could play out our favourite scenes word for word. *Clueless* had some of our best lines. Pez was better than me. I'd mix up the expressions, but he'd get all the timings and even the American accents just right. At Christmas, we'd play chess and Perudo, and in the summer when it was hot, we'd hike the bikes all the way to the Heath and soothe our steaming skin in the icy cold water at the lido. It was grazed knees and full hearts until one wet April day when the doctors found the grapefruit pushing against Mum's chest.

Mum had a primary mediastinal large B-cell lymphoma. I wrote the words down carefully. Stage 4, the doctor said to Dad, so I wrote this down too. He also said it was too late for treatment, but I didn't write that. I didn't need to. His voice was like a Sharpie splodging clean paper with its black ink, the permanent kind that soaks through the pages, ruining the next and then the next. Mum started the treatment anyway, but it didn't work and quickly she became thinner and less able to talk. Pez gripped my hand under the willow tree, pulsing it gently in bursts of three, our silent code, and each of his little squeezes assured me he was there and always would be. Unlike everyone else, he never pretended everything was normal or even remotely OK. My chest got so tight that summer and I'd be so busy breathing, I never thought of words like *thank you*. Three weeks before my thirteenth birthday they moved Mum into the tall hospital by the Euston Road where she lay in a bed sweating and tied up in tubes. Eight days later she stopped breathing forever.

The night after she died, Dad got drunk, and when he was done shouting at the sky, he came inside and stared at the Banksy print that hung on our living room wall. He let rip at the pink Mona Lisa, roaring at her like it was her fault Mum was gone. The next morning, he sat me and Ariel down and told us that in two weeks we'd be moving. Without Mum, he needed help, so we had to be near Aunt Wendy. Without Mum, I needed to be near Pez and the white willow tree and the life I knew, but nobody stopped for long enough to really think about this.

It was the first shop-bought birthday cake I'd ever had. Dad, Aunt Wendy, Ariel and Pez stood around our suddenly cold kitchen, trying too hard to look happy. Dad's trembling hands lit the candles and I looked at their gathered faces, but I couldn't do it. All the tingling life had left me. I waved my arm over the hot mess, trying to kill the flames, trying to make their tiny lights go out.

'C'mon, Vetty. Make a wish!' Pez shouted it angrily like I wasn't trying. I wanted to stab him and Colin the Caterpillar with my spoon. I was thirteen, not three! Besides, I *was* trying.

I didn't care much for cycling after that. Not sure I cared much for anything and three days after this unhappy birthday the truck came and drove our life down the motorway to Somerset.

Dad finally bought me a phone; this was the extent of the good news that summer. At first, me and Pez spoke all the time. He'd share chess moves and tell bad jokes he'd learned from even worse films, but it wasn't long before those calls became messages and the days became weeks

and weeks became months, until one day during the Christmas holidays we stopped communicating altogether.

Dad and everyone else wanted life to get back to some kind of normal. Pretending everything was fine felt like the easiest way, and I pretended my heart out until things almost were. I started my new school and I made friends with Liv and Freya and Jess and they helped to fill most of the empty space. It was reasonably easy to get by provided I avoided being all of myself. I considered telling Jess about my greedy heart until I realised I wasn't ready for how different things would be if I did. I was just settling in, already the new girl with the dead mum and the funny name, who lives with her gay aunts. I didn't need another thing singling me out. I learned quickly to keep some stuff back, but there are times when it's as though I watched those friends behind glass, observing them from the lens of my iPhone. Times I've wanted to explain that what they see isn't all of me. Times I've wondered if they'll ever know about the rest, the me that could at any point explode or take off like a rocket. Guess I never felt like explaining. I never had to explain anything to Pez. But maybe that was then, and this is now. Soon I'll be back to London anyway. Soon I'll be back to me.

3

At first Dad said we'd be gone a year but quickly he stopped talking about going back. Then, last month, his boss told him to be in the office five days a week or be fired, or words to that effect. Having supported his working from home for almost four years, it's not like the company is being completely heartless. Ariel starts her school holidays tomorrow so we'll set off behind the removal truck in the afternoon, driving our life up the motorway and back to St Agnes Villas. Dad drove to London last week to check the tenants out and he bumped into Pez on the road outside. He said everything was like it had always been; Pez had gotten bigger and his bike had gotten smaller but that was it.

'What if he's changed?' I asked. 'Or he thinks I have?'

'People don't really change, Vetty,' Dad said. 'Not really.'

I hope with all my heart that this is true.

Pez was never a boyfriend, he was a best friend and the last person I've felt properly close to. I can't stop imagining how it will be to see him again, or how life will be once I'm back. Every day I think about the stupid fun things we did and how now, I struggle to know where to begin saying all I want to say. As kids, me and Pez wore the same jeans; we

even had matching baseball shirts with our names on the back that his dad, Harland, bought for us in America. Everything felt right. I felt right. It was only when we left London that *being myself* became so complicated. In Somerset I was more girly but I felt less right inside, and it was nothing to do with the make-up I wore or the clothes I cared about. It went deeper; an uncomfortable itch that gnawed at the pit of me, like a buried truth trying to wriggle its way out. Whether this was to do with the move or me, I'm not sure. I just know right now, I'd give anything to be that girl on her bike again, that girl who wasn't so afraid to be herself.

I'm on the couch, Dad is beside me and Ariel is sitting on the floor. It's our last night at our cottage on Aunt Wendy's farm, one of two rentals she runs with Fran, her soon-to-be wife. Without these women and this lovely place, none of us would have managed to stay vaguely sane for the last four years. Wendy is too nice to say it but I know she's relieved we're leaving. She's only human. Besides, she and Fran are getting married next month and they're knee-deep in wedding preparations. It's all that's been talked about around here for weeks. Not that anyone is complaining. We've tried different cakes and ciders and there was even a tepee trial in the paddock last week. From what I've seen, planning a wedding is way more fun than getting married.

Fran's been making a playlist of their favourite hip-hop and very late one night last week, I was crossing the yard when I saw the two of them dancing in the kitchen. I stood outside the double doors in the dark and watched as they moved around the room to 'Can't Take My Eyes Off You'

by Lauryn Hill. It's their first dance song and these things are supposed to be a surprise, so I hid there in the dark and said nothing, but like the words in the song, I couldn't stop watching as they tumbled in and out of each other's arms, laughing under the bright lights. Seeing how they moved and how they looked at each other made me so happy, but also kind of sad, for some reason.

Everything besides the TV and the cushions under us is boxed up waiting to go. Dad's in his tracksuit bottoms, working, and Arial sits between my feet as I methodically rake her hair for nits. I'm combing sections, tying them up with elastics as I go. It's the worst job ever but as I drag the shiny silver teeth through her conditioner-soaked hair, it helps me think of Mum. I bend over and take in Arial's features upside down: her turned-up nose and the freckles that are almost too big. I used to photograph her expressions, like her funny grandma face, which is the absolute best. I'd just take shots on my phone but I've stopped all that now. Maybe I'll start again when we get to London. Maybe I'll get around to printing some from the files on my laptop and I might even hang some of the better ones in my room. It never felt right to knock holes in Wendy's wall.

Arial doesn't want to miss a second of *Parks and Recreation* and she ducks left, out of my eyeline. April is her favourite character and she mouths perfectly in sync with her every word. She's only ten. I should probably worry about the amount of TV she watches. I check Dad's face for signs of concern but he's clearly more captivated by *Parks and Rec* than by the hundreds of logos dotted all over his screen. He sits with his phone under his ear in that way he does on long

conference calls grunting occasionally to let them know he's still there. I wonder whether the people he's speaking to have any idea how unprofessional he looks right now.

I've got headphones on, as the very last minutes of *Stranger Things* series two plays on my iPad. Delousing requires focus and I'm determined to savour Eleven and Will's dance at the Snow Ball, but my mind is in overdrive. I wish I'd had a more convincing comeback for Liv earlier, or even better, I wish I could have been honest, but more than three and a half years after that sleepover I still feel awkward. I'm obviously putting out some vibe for her to have said what she said.

It's not that I'm opposed to coming out. It's not as though my family isn't open-minded. I'm sure that if I told Wendy and Fran that I was gay they'd throw their arms around me, but it's not that simple. This isn't about the electrically charged feelings that I sometimes have for girls. It's that I've had those same fizzy feelings for boys too and explaining this out loud seems so challenging. And, since I've only ever kissed boys, I don't know how real-world any of it is, or what I'm entitled to come out as. Does everyone's love life come with mind-bending levels of complication and bewilderment? Or is that just me?

In the corner of my eye I spy Dad's laptop closing. This is followed by a draught as he pulls the left headphone away from my ear. 'Shame those fish fingers won't cook themselves,' he says, getting up. I take the last section of Ariel's hair and sweep the comb through it, wiping the sludgy residue against a fresh clump of tissue. 'Nearly done,' I say, inspecting it for any lingering scalp squatters. All clear! I

give her a celebratory shoulder shove. 'We'll wash it after we eat,' I say, tying her slimy hair up in a bun. She gives me a double thumbs-up without her eyes leaving the screen.

Dad still has tiny white sticks in his ears. A lot of the time I've no idea whether he's talking to me or his phone. I follow him into the kitchen and we start our familiar meal-time dance without a word. We've become one of those families who eat the same thing on the same day each week, which, given Mum read Lebanese cookbooks and stored her homemade granola in labelled glass jars, isn't something I'm proud of. If she saw how we ate now she might die all over again. We eat at Wendy's as much as we can, so I can still only make six things, and Dad, for all his enthusiasm, is a lame sous chef. So Sunday is roast chicken, Monday is stir-fry, Tuesday is usually sausages, Wednesday is spaghetti bolognese, and Thursday, today, is fish fingers. Friday is chilli, but nobody likes kidney beans so it's basically spicy bolognese with rice. Saturday comes via the Domino's app. It's written up on the fridge but sometimes we just eat cereal in front of the TV anyway. I gave Ariel Rice Krispies with a side of celery sticks once. I figure as long as I include something green with each meal then she'll make it to my age with all of her teeth.

She cartwheels into the room in reassuringly rude health. Dad's upper body is entirely in the freezer and an icy mist gathers around his dismembered stripy legs. 'Did you see the letter about that sixth-form induction thing you missed?' he shouts up.

'I showed it to *you*.'

'Of course,' he says. 'Forgot.'

I lean over the sink, stabbing at a raisin that's been jammed in the plughole since breakfast. 'And I scanned back the confirmation to the removals company.'

'Good,' he says, slinging a giant sack of peas on to the counter and pulling himself up to standing. 'Please say they took the credit card?'

I slide the plastic ziplock along and stare in at the frosted green pearls. It's a lovely image. Comforting. Dad has tons of photography books, weighty hardback ones with beautiful covers, and I often spread them all out on the living room floor to pore over the glossy pages. Mum would buy them for his birthday and they felt like proper presents, because I knew he'd never spend that much money on books for himself. There's one photographer who only takes pictures of ordinary everyday stuff: people at the beach, plates of eggs and chips, that type of thing, but in his photos, nothing seems ordinary; he makes you look again. He's my favourite. He might appreciate these freezer-burned peas.

'Vetty? The credit card?'

'Sorry,' I say. 'Yeah.' He bobs his head, ticking it off the list in his mind. I grab the potatoes out of the fridge and start to peel one into the bin. Arial likes real chips, homemade like Mum used to make, but they take ages. We'll have to make a real dinner every day once we get to London. Seven days a week, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, not including extra weekend meals and Arial's packed lunches. 'How was your conference call?'

I'm only being polite, but he sighs like he's thinking about the answer. 'The client asked another agency to pitch.'

Everyone is nervous we could lose the account, but apart from that ...' He trails off.

I shouldn't have gone there. I only ask this stuff because I feel like I should, probably cos Mum isn't around to any more. But my head is already full with other things.

He whisks Ariel up on to his knee. 'It'll be fine,' he says, wrapping his arms around her and popping the white buds from his ears like he's up for a chat. 'Because it has to be, eh? All set for tomorrow?'

I nod but my eyes veer off towards the fridge. It's an old American-style one and looks like it should no longer work, but it does. It came with us from London and it's like another pillar holding us all upright. Sometimes its gentle hum will break for seconds, and the silence frightens me as much as if an actual human had stopped breathing. That fridge was Mum's scrapbook and today it's still covered with photos, bills, Ariel's gym certificates and a thousand school notices. Barely an inch of stainless steel is visible.

It's the storyboard of our family, a sort of shrine, and high up in the left-hand corner, above our invites to Wendy and Fran's wedding, is a photo of Pez and me. Luna took it on the steps outside his house. I'm wearing green polka dot shades and my short, bobbed hair blazes in the sun. Pez's left arm is slung casually around my neck as his face squints up to the camera. Both our purple sweet-stained tongues jutting out like ten-year-old punks. It's been there for years, never questioned, never covered over. It might be my favourite photo in the world. It hits me that this precious collage should come down for the movers tomorrow, but I resolve not to move it now, or ever.

‘Mum used to say you were like those kids in that film,’ he says, scratching his head trying to think of the title.

‘*Pretty in Pink*,’ I say, turning around. ‘But I’d hardly call them *kids*. And she only said it because my hair is red like Molly Ringwald.’

‘She loved that film.’ He mumbles it to himself, pulling the chopping board towards him and slicing my newly peeled potatoes into chubby sticks. ‘And your hair’s not red,’ he says, looking up.

‘Auburn, whatever, and anyway Pez wasn’t exactly Duckie.’

Dad lays down his knife. ‘What!’ he says. ‘I saw him, waiting outside on that bike like a puppy. I watched his face light up when you’d come to the door.’

‘That’s such a dad thing to say.’

‘Well, it’s true,’ he says. ‘Mum arrived home one afternoon fit to burst, I’ll never forget.’ His hand covers his mouth and he looks out of the window. ‘She’d been walking past the square from the bus stop and heard giggling coming from the swings over the hedge. She must have recognised your laugh and squeezed her head into the gap in the railing above the sign on the square.’ He turns to me. ‘You know the one?’

I’ve heard this story so many times but I let him go on. ‘Uh-huh.’

‘There you were, kissing Pez! *On the lips*, she said!’ At this, Ariel’s face does the full revolted grandma and she slumps from Dad’s knee. Neither he nor I protest when she edges towards the door and slinks back into the TV. His shoulders give a small shudder as the memory hits. ‘You’d barely turned twelve,’ he says, staring into thin air.

I shut my eyes. I remember that kiss, but it sounds like life on another galaxy now. It was a week before the doctors found the grapefruit and it's hard not to wonder whether Mum really had heard us laughing, or whether she stopped by the railings because she had to. She'd been getting short of breath for months. It was one of those things you only notice looking back, and I wonder whether Dad is thinking this too.

It was the only kiss. I was actually twelve and three quarters and Pez was only a few months behind. I made him pretend he was George, our new tennis teacher who was twenty-two and from Greece. I don't know what made these details so dizzying *or* how exactly Pez was supposed to *be* George, particularly given George was a girl, but this didn't bother either of us much. There were no tongues, but I made him do it over and over, quite a few times in fact, and my cheeks smoulder remembering the urgent feeling between my legs and how I had to stop myself from pushing up against him in his white shorts.

'Bet he's thrilled?' Dad says, throwing an uncooked chip at me from the other side of the table and missing.

'About what?' I ask, dipping down to rescue the chip. When I look up, he's making Arial's *duh* face, which is one thing on her, or even me, but on a man pushing fifty, is not good.

'That you're moving back.'

I can't bring myself to say we haven't been in touch enough for me to tell him. 'I wouldn't go that far.'

He watches as I bite my lip and then he spins slowly around. 'True friendship, Vetty,' he says, shuffling his stack of uncooked chips, 'is for the brave.'

I pick up the peeler and bend back over the bin, trying to look busy, hating that my lack of courage might be so obvious. Then Dad switches on the fryer and starts humming, which he does when he's nervous. His pitch matches that of the fridge. 'I watched a few episodes of the new *Darkzone* the other night,' he says, cheerily. 'Luna does all her own stunts apparently.' *Darkzone* is in its fourth series. Dad's watched them all. Everyone has. 'It'll be on iPlayer, but maybe some of it is a little adult,' he says, shaking *all* the fish fingers from the giant box into the pan.

I stop chopping. 'Dad!'

'What?' He twists around.

'You've done it again! They don't cook properly when you put that many on at once.' He turns away and stares into the frying pan, not saying anything, and my words bounce around the room. I watch his back go up and down as giant breaths fill his chest. Why isn't he teasing me about getting so wound up like he usually does?

Very slowly he returns to face me. 'Sweetheart—' He stops. His face has a new expression and his soft voice only makes my words echo louder. His lips purse like he's concentrating hard as he folds up the huge, empty Birds Eye box. 'You've taken on a lot,' he says with a sigh. 'You've had to.' He raises a hand up to make his point, but he's holding the box the wrong way up and bright orange breadcrumbs scatter like confetti all over the tiles. It's everything I can do not to reach over to clean them up. 'And the truth is you'll have to take on more once we move.' He puts the egg flipper down and reaches for my hand. He looks disturbingly serious.

‘I just meant we’ll never eat all—’

‘I’m not talking about the bloody fish fingers now, Vetty,’ he says. ‘Believe it or not,’ he passes his hand slowly over the range, ‘after four years, I’m still working out how to do this parenting thing on my own. And I’m not sure if I’m always doing it right. I keep asking myself, what would *she* do,’ he says, briefly closing his eyes and moving his balled fist to his chest. ‘Look, I know going back to London is a big move but I think she’d agree that we’re ready.’

It takes me a minute to speak. ‘But your work, isn’t that why—’

He gives the pan a brusque shake. ‘It’s not just that. This —’ he sniffs and looks around the kitchen – ‘was never meant to be permanent. We needed to be here. We needed Wendy and Fran. You were too young.’ He looks into my eyes and I feel see-through. ‘But we need to live *our* lives again. Does that make sense?’ He tilts my chin to his face. ‘I’m tired of holding my breath. Aren’t you?’ The truth in his words knocks me but I manage to nod back. ‘And I’ll try not to land too much on you,’ he says. ‘I promise.’

I pull away and kneel down, pretending to sweep up the fish finger mess, but he bends down too, shaking the crumbs from my fingers. Then he puts his arm around my neck and we kind of slowly slump against the warm oven door, him gently rubbing my head until my eyes close. All I see in my mind is those two faces staring out from that fridge.

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4088-8833-9; eBook: 978-1-4088-8832-2

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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