



IN THE HOLIDAYS BEFORE the dreaded term at my school's outdoor education campus two things out of the ordinary happened.

A picture of me was plastered all over a twenty-metre billboard at St Kilda junction.

And I kissed Ben Capaldi.

At least twice a year my godmother, who is some big deal advertising producer, comes back to Melbourne from New York to see her family and people like us, her old friends.

Her name is Bebe, which is pronounced like two bees, but we call her Beeb. She hasn't got kids so I get all her kid attention, which to be completely honest is not a huge amount. But it's 'quality time'. And quality presents. Especially when I was little. When I was five she organised for me to adopt a baby doll from

FAO Schwarz. She took photos of me in the ‘nursery’ – they actually had shop assistants dressed up as nurses – and I showed them at school.

That was when I started being friends with Holly. As she looked at my doll, Meggy MacGregor – who had a feeding bottle, nappies, designer clothes, birth certificate and a car capsule – I could see her struggling. It was jealousy/hatred vs admiration/envy, and lucky for me admiration/envy won the day. She’s a good friend, but a mean enemy.

We were at the beach house, lounging around in a delicious haze of lemon poppy seed cake and pots of tea, talking about digging out the wetsuits for a freezing cold spring swim and whether or not sharks have a preferred feeding time. I was lying on the floor with my feet up in an armchair. Toenails painted Titanium – dark, purplish – drying nicely.

I’d just put down *Othello* for a bout of Angry Birds. My sister Charlotte, thirteen going on obnoxious, was laughing too loudly at a text message, hoping one of us would ask her what was so funny. Dad was doing a cryptic crossword. Mum was answering emails on her laptop even though she was supposedly on holiday. ‘Sexually transmitted disease never sleeps,’ she said when I reminded her of the holiday concept. Gross.

She used to be a regular doctor, but she kept getting more and more obscure qualifications and went into community health

and health policy, and now she basically runs the free world from the Sexually Transmitted Infections Clinic in Fitzroy.

If you can think of a more embarrassing place than STIC to visit your mum at work, think again, because there isn't one.

Holly loves it. Anything for attention. We went there after school on the last day of term for emergency gelati money so we'd have the necessary energy required to trawl Savers, and this old woman gave us the foulest look when we hit the street. Holly deadpanned her: 'At least we're getting it treated.'

Beeb was sitting on the comfy sofa with the beautiful Designers Guild paisley fabric that she bossed Mum into choosing about ten years ago, with all the bright colours now softly worn and faded, flipping through some model agency 'books' on screen and saying, insipid, insipid, dreary, tarty, bland, blah, starved, insipid . . . She groaned and stretched out her black-jeans-clad legs. 'Where are the interesting gals?'

'They broke the mould after you two,' my dad said. Meaning Beeb and Mum. It never works when my dad tries to give a compliment; he's simply not that charming.

'Thanks,' I said, thinking *interesting* is after all a modest claim.

I must have sounded way more offended than I felt, because when I glanced up from my screen all eyes were upon me. Upside down, disconcertingly, because of me lying on the floor. When I untangled my limbs and sat up it was as though I'd surrounded myself with flashing lights and arrows. Everyone

kept looking at me. Really looking. And I was wishing I'd just shut up, because my mother was probably about to remember that I still hadn't unloaded the dishwasher and if I had time to lie there playing Angry Birds – which is quite a distant rung on her almighty hierarchy of tasks from Reading a Set Text for Next Term – then I certainly had time to unload the dishwasher, and I had to remember the family was a community, and in order for a community to function . . .

Beeb got up. 'Come here, kid,' she said, leading me to the window. She was looking at me with a strange frown-and-squint gaze. 'What did you do with all those pimples?'

'Roaccutane,' I said. 'I had dry skin, dry eyeballs and no spit.'

'Till they corrected the dose,' said Dr Mother.

'What about all the hardware in your mouth?' asked Beeb.

'Off last week.' I ran my tongue over my teeth. They still felt weirdly slippy.

'Take off your glasses.' I did.

'You are gorgeous. How did I not notice this?' It was a eureka moment, she said later.

'Maybe because you see my visage in my mind,' I said, mangling a bit of *Othello*.

'That is true, my sweetie,' said Beeb.

'She has a pointy nose exactly like a witch,' said Charlotte.

'Her nose is fine,' said my father, who never seems to realise 'fine' is as good as an insult.

‘If you like huge noses, which no one actually does,’ said Charlotte.

‘She’s got character,’ said Beeb. ‘And that’s what I’m looking for.’

‘You’re talking about *her*? My sister? Sibylla Quinn?’ said Charlotte, her voice squeaking with growing incredulity. ‘She’s totally fugs. Totally.’

‘Don’t use that word,’ said my mother, who only recently found out what fugs meant, and then only because she used it so I felt that I had to tell her, and she said, oh, that’s disappointing, I thought it was like a cuddly version of ugly. No surprise this is the same woman who thought lol meant ‘lots of love.’ It was her all-purpose sign-off for texts till I set her straight a few years ago.

‘I don’t want pretty little generics, I want Different, I want Individual!’ said Beeb.

‘What for?’

‘Perfume launch. A billboard and magazine campaign. *Jeune Femme Sauvage*.’ She was rummaging in her latest designer version of the magic bag that contains her whole office. She pulled out a camera, took some photos of me and studied the screen. ‘Perfect. God, you look like your mum.’

‘Old and tired? Poor girl,’ said my mother.

We looked at her. She has a high forehead and a bony nose and a big mouth. (In both senses.) She doesn’t dye her hair. It’s cut straight and parted on one side. It’s the same colour as mine. Mouse. Only she calls it rat because she’s *so* funny. She does have a great smile. And she smiled.

‘Take a picture, it’ll last longer,’ she said.

Beeb took a picture of me and Mum together. We’re both smiling. And I can see that even though I’m not old and tired, we do look pretty similar.

Mum hugged me and whispered in my ear: *dishwasher*.



2

friday 28 september

After Fred . . .

saturday 29 september

After Fred died . . .

sunday 30 september

After Fred died I divided my time between blind disbelief, blank chaos and therapy.

The psychiatrist, Esther, said, write a journal, Lou, how about writing a journal, would you consider writing a journal, Lou, give it some thought . . .

We are in the slowly unwinding transition out of therapy in the lead-up to me going away to school. Who knew: you can't just walk out of therapy. At least it is not recommended that you just walk out of therapy. No matter how many times you might keenly wish to just walk out of therapy.

There will be a formal handover to the school counsellor,

whose name I don't know yet. I'll be the new girl, starting in term four. Boarding for a whole term, a whole nine weeks, in the wilderness.

I've been angry through the whole therapy thing, which might be a displacement of my guilt/sorrow/depression at the whole Fred thing. We don't use 'depression' in the usual sense, because truly, if I don't have a reason to feel depressed, I don't know who . . .

It is possible that Esther, who is after all a psychiatrist-with-a-special-interest-in-grieving-and-its-effects-on-mental-health-in-young-people, is right about writing a journal.

So I have decided, well, why not write something down?

If you don't want to write about your Feelings, you can simply write about the Physical World, what you see, what you hear . . . facts, things, stuff. Jeez, so it's not compulsory to eviscerate myself? To slash myself to a slow death with a million small paper cuts? Thank you kindly.

There are whole nights I do nothing but wait. For what?

You could say I have been spending too much time alone for too long. Perhaps it is indeed time to start talking to an exercise book. The internal, external . . . infernal, diurnal, eternal journal. It is essentially just more talking to myself, but that is okay because my heart is its own fierce country where nobody else is welcome.

Cut him out in little stars. Hard to believe a man even wrote that; it's so fragile.

I completely get that giddy arrogance, the infatuation. The laugh-and-spin embrace of the absent beloved. If you were writing an essay, you'd probably yarp on about the way in which it can be read as prefiguring Romeo's death. A portent.

I love the staccato it-t-t-eration and the soft fading sibilance of 'stars'. Imagine the words breathed out, written down fast and hard onto thick, smeared paper, the tarry smell, black sputtery ink. Such potent meaning inside so delicate an image feels risky, implosive, cataclysmic.

But if there's no danger, no risk, it's not love, is it?

I've told Esther exactly nothing of any of this.

Fred and I talked about it like we talked about everything, and decided we were too young to have sex. Then we basically went for it.

Because, sure, head was saying *maybe not such a good idea*, but soul was saying *I know you*, and body was saying *come to me*. And that's two against one.

Hey, at least we were older than Romeo and Juliet.

Fred did the research. Ever the scientist. The failure rate for condoms mostly relates to misuse, or accidents. We decided we'd go straight to a morning-after pill in the case of an accident. And we also decided we wouldn't have accidents, and we

didn't. We took it in turns to buy the condoms. Nowhere too near home.

Going on the pill would have meant horrible 'discussions'. My mothers being very responsible and ultimately *understanding* and *tolerant* with about three million warnings and provisos. And the family doctor. Gag. I did not fancy the whole gang metaphorically standing at the bedside. A strange doctor would have been possible but weird, too. I didn't need the lecture.

Condoms sometimes break because someone is being rough, or the girl isn't 'ready', which sounds so sad. Sounds more like rape than sex to me. That wasn't us. We were all liquid aching and longing. It was fun being beginners together. You only get that once. It took a little while. We were learning a new language, after all.

If we'd ever asked for a weekend away together all the parents, including Fred's stepmother, would have been frowning and conferencing and counselling.

But all we asked was to do our homework together a couple of times a week, and hang out a bit at the weekend. So it was easy. And we did homework, our nerdiness as compatible as our lust. We were pretty lucky. You'd have to say.

Now I'm all packed up and ready to go to a jolly outdoorsy camp called Mt Fairweather where you can learn to be jolly and jolly well fend for yourselves and run up a jolly mountain and learn which way's north and how to make a fire and incinerate some jolly marshmallows, no doubt.

Esther says it will be good for me. She says it will do me *the world of good*. But where is the world of good? I'm pretty sure it's not stuck up a mountain with a bunch of private-school clones.

Dan and Estelle and Janie are all on exchange in Paris. They left last week. More tears. More scattering.

Dan's shrink said it would be good for him. Maybe he said *the world of good*. Perhaps Paris is the world of good.

I do try to live in the moment, but it doesn't work particularly well.

In the wall is the window. On the window is the curtain. Through the window is the moon. You can even write gibberish in the journal if you like; it still connects you to the page, to the idea, at least, of communicating. Apparently.

Sometimes I'll write to you, Fred; sometimes I'll write to me. Sometimes I will just write what I see because I see it for you, too. *When I see a fingernail moon in a fading sky . . .*

3



IT TOOK A WHOLE lot of persuading – mostly of Mum – to get me from the living room floor up onto that billboard. Beeb knew her so well. The four things that clinched the okay were:

I'll be there the whole time supervising.

No one will recognise her.

The vibe is fairytale, not 'sexy'.

She can put the fee in her travel account.

The first three were for Mum and Dad, the fourth was really for me. My parents are notoriously unmotivated by money. Not me. I can't get enough of it. And the fee was huge – it's a global campaign. (I'd have to babysit the current clients into old age to earn that much at twelve dollars an hour.)

My travel account has been going forever. Years ago I

negotiated that instead of going to Byron Bay for ‘schoolies’ week, in the summer break between school and university, I get to housesit Beeb’s apartment in New York (Upper West Side, two blocks from Zabar’s, so I won’t starve) while she is here in Melbourne. Only, so far, with babysitting and holiday work and having taken out certain essential amounts I’ve only ever got about three hundred dollars, which is a fraction of an airfare.

Even when Mum had said okay she wasn’t exactly in love with the whole billboard plan.

When I came home with my hair dyed – and it looked great, by the way – she nearly had a conniption.

Beeb joked her out of it by talking in headlines:

‘NEW STUDY REVEALS HAIRDYE DOES NOT CHEMICALLY NEUTRALISE
POLITICAL AWARENESS.’

‘FEMINIST SURVIVES PROFESSIONAL EYEBROW WAX.’

‘MAKEUP – IT WASHES OFF!’

‘These things were serious crimes back in the day,’ Beeb said to me by way of explanation. As though I haven’t heard every feminist rant under the sun and am not a proud feminist ranter myself, when warranted, and when I can be bothered.

‘And PS, Mother, I am the only person in my year level who doesn’t have dyed hair,’ I said.

‘Not anymore, you’re not,’ she said, eyebrows up.

There was a big pre-production meeting at the photographer's studio where Beeb 'consulted' the art director, who 'consulted' the makeup artist, who had a colourist on 'standby'. To hear them you would think my hair was of global significance. But whatever they did it sure did not look like any other hair I'd ever seen.

They talked about 'layering' the colour, and 'textural' colour, and 'variegated' colour. And the amazing thing was that even though it had about ten different colours in it – all individually painted and put in foils – it still looked like my hair, but as though it was walking along with its own set of glamour spotlights.

Getting it done was outlandishly boring. It took a whole day to do hair and the makeup 'tests'. But I would have put up with it ten times over to see Charlotte turning green when I got home.

'You don't even look like yourself,' was the best she could come up with as she huffed off to sulk in her room.

After pretending like it was no big deal, I went upstairs and locked myself in the bathroom. I actually could not stop staring at myself in the mirror. I looked awesome. It was mesmerising. And Charlotte was right for once in her scurvy little life: I looked nothing at all like myself. It was me with a work of art stuck right onto my face.

I kept blinking at my reflection. One minute I could see myself, the next, just the beautiful mask. Which looked five years older than me. If I were in a scary movie, this would be

the perfect moment to first experience psychosis. Maybe the mask would talk to me. As my now-crazy older self. From the future. I shuddered. I was freaking myself out. I stuffed my hair into a ponytail and turned on the taps.

The ‘shoot’ was right before the end of third term, and the billboard was up on the last day of the holidays before we left the city for our fourth term, boarding at Mt Fairweather, which is Crowthorne Grammar’s outdoor education campus.

‘Deadline tighter than a fish’s arsehole,’ as Beeb said.

She swears like a mad thing. She says it comes from spending too much time with crews.

As soon as the billboard went up, it was all over Facebook. Holly was posting it before the paste was dry. In one keystroke I went from being a year ten ‘nobody’ to a year ten ‘unknown quantity’.

Once it hit Facebook, Holly applied some pressure, and I got the event invite to Laura Jenkins’ party, which was on that very night. Holly had told me about the party a couple of weeks ago. She understands that I prefer to know when I’m being socially outcast. I pressed attend (what the hell – I didn’t have anything else on) and shut my laptop as Mum walked in to check that I was packed, which I more or less was.

‘Sibbie, what is this?’ She was looking at my super-sized, multi-gadget, blood-red Swiss Army knife. ‘You’re taking a weapon?’ She frowned, no doubt running a mental checklist of some of the miscreants in my year level.

'It's optional. But, yeah, I'm going totally gangsta.'

She laughed.

'I feel like I'm sending you back to the Stone Age.'

'You might as well be.' I gave my mobile a hammy kiss.

'Farewell, my heart, my life.'

'No texting for nine weeks! Your thumbs might drop off.'

'They'll get axing exercise.'

'Known as "chopping" in some circles, I believe.'

'Yeah, that.'

'Promise you'll write lots of letters?'

'It's compulsory. But I would anyway. And everyone says The Letter Home is all that stops you going crazy on the solo overnight hike.'

She cast a doubtful eye over my bags and the surrounding mess. 'You don't want some help?'

'I'm supposed to be self-sufficient for the whole term or your money back, so I think I'll be okay.'

'Have you packed undies?'

'Mum!'

She laughed as she went out the door. 'Just saying.'

There have been certain holidays on which I've forgotten certain essential items. But no big deal, right? You can always supplement when you get there. Anyway, this time there's a list.

Leonie came over to me; he always gets anxious when there's luggage out – it usually means the nice man from the doggy kennel is about to pick him up. I gave him a reassuring back

scratch, feeling a bit guilty to be offering last-minute affection. I take him for granted these days, i.e. ignore him heaps.

He wagged his stumpy tail agreeably. Dogs are lovely – they don't even know the meaning of grudge. Twelve years ago, Leonie was the most beautiful name I could imagine. A mixture of my friend 'Leah', and 'pony'. Mum asked if I knew it was usually a girl's name, and our puppy was a boy. I pretended I knew, to maintain my four-year-old dignity. I was pretty sure Leonie wouldn't care either way. In the spirit of male solidarity, my dad has always called him Leo.

Before burying my phone in a pair of thick socks to pack it – conveniently not thinking about the contract signed in good faith pledging not to bring phones to camp – I texted Michael: *skype?*

Michael, my oldest friend, my strangest friend. He prefers skype to phone because he says the role of voice in conversation accounts for fifty per cent or less of communicating. He also counts skype as a social outing, which means he's off the hook for organising an actual social outing. He's there by the time I get to my desk.

'Are you jetlagged?' I asked.

'A little.'

'How was Rome?'

'Ancient.'

'What did you watch on the plane?' I give Michael pop-culture viewing suggestions for long flights.

'*Friday Night Lights*. You were right.'

'So, the billboard went up.'

'I saw it.'

'Large, isn't it?'

'Extra extra large. *Livin' large*.'

'*Livin' large*. At least it'll be down by the time we get back.'

'They've captured an authentic Sibylla look, though.'

'It's the unfocused gaze, because I'm wishing to be somewhere else.'

'Which obviously translates nicely into . . . ' He was casting about for the desired message of the ad.

'*I smell good*, I guess.'

'You nailed it. Will you do any more of this work?'

'I was only allowed to do this because it was Beeb. You can imagine the lecture – my mother is still fifty per cent horrified. And speaking of horror – I've said I'll go to Laura's party tonight.'

'Celebrity life begins. Don't you want to go?'

'Yes/no.'

'Because it will be good/bad?'

'Pretty much.'

He nodded.

'What are you reading?'

He smiled apologetically and held up *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. Of course he's reading Thoreau as we head into the wilderness: he's Michael.

'Michael, you rock.'

His eyes shine. 'Sibylla, you – tall tree.'

'I can't ask you what I should wear, so I guess I'm just here sharing some nervousness.'

‘I hope it turns out to be more good/bad than bad/good. Here, have some Thoreau.’ He found a page in the book and read out, *‘I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.’*

‘Hmmm, so if I substitute “party” for “woods” . . . I’m already feeling less ambivalent about it.’

He smiled, said goodbye and left, so it was just me on the screen holding up my goodbye hand and contemplating the most immediate essential fact of life: what to wear.

I finished packing and had time to try on five or six variations of ‘very casual’ for the party. A last-minute invitee can’t look like she’s tried too hard.

That party is how I came to kiss Ben Capaldi, the most popular boy in our year level, someone I never thought even had me on his map. What am I talking about? I know I was never on his map. I was never in the same *room* as his map.

‘Maps’ were on my brain because I’d been worrying about getting lost, aware I have no sense of direction and I was about to be in the zero-landmark-everything-looks-the-same-to-a-city-girl, no-buildings, no-sign-posts, map-dependent . . . wilderness.

Parties are uncomfortable events for me. I do want to get invited. If I’m not invited I feel sad, and it is horrible hearing before and after you’ve had nothing to do with. Smiling and

pretending dog-eared experience is enough. But when I am invited to a party, I straightaway start dreading it.

As soon as I'm confronted with shrieking, giggling, drinking, loud music, random hookups, uninhibited dancing – I feel glum. I don't have fun. I'm not 'fun'. I'm serious. I'm responsible. I worry about my friends getting drunk, getting their drinks spiked, getting hurt, getting messy, getting used, getting pregnant, getting sexually transmitted diseases, and drowning in their own vomit.

On top of that I *never* know what to wear.

And I don't like drinking, but I have to pretend to drink, so I at least appear to be 'fun', and to be having 'fun'.

I used to like dancing until a boy – Billy Gardiner – told me I looked like a spastic tarantula. So now I only dance if it's crowded enough and dark enough that nobody can see me.

So a typical party for me usually involves trying unsuccessfully to talk to people who are drunk, hanging around the food, speaking to the parents, visiting the bathroom, hoping that by the time I come out more people I know have arrived, not dancing, finding a kitchen or garden through-road position to prop, so I get passing-traffic conversation, and later on patrolling to check that my friends are okay to get home. Holly says I'm more like a party monitor than a guest.

But post-billboard, the script for this party ran differently. For starters, some people looked at me rather than around me when I arrived.

After Holly's hiiiiiiiieee mwah mwah, she pulled me into a huddle with Gabi and Ava, and started making a big deal out of the billboard thing. Usually it would make me uncomfortable being the centre of attention, but because I'd told Holly everything and she'd had three cranberry vodkas, it was more like she was the centre of attention, which suited us both just fine.

Hours later when Ben Capaldi, apparently off his face, staggered into focal range and said (to me!) *your pulchritude defies belief* I was – speechless. I may have lifted one sober eyebrow. I've perfected the one-eyebrow lift in the mirror, never in a million years thinking I'd get to use it in a social situation. I smiled and turned away. I could not think of one thing to say. But as my heart flipped like a hooked fish, I was wondering if a girl like me had *ever* turned away from a boy like Ben.

Was it wrong to feel a little thrill when I caught his look of surprise? This handsome boy? This boy the whole world loves? It might have looked like muscle-flexing on my part, turning away like that, but it was unadorned panic. A when-in-doubt-stick-your-head-in-the-sand move. Nice work.

And he thought I didn't know what pulchritude meant? Naturally. It's not like he would have noticed me in the Same Latin Class for the Last Three Years. Dud compliment, anyway. It's such an ugly word for beauty. Besides which, he's the pulchritudinous one. He is the walking definition of boy beauty.

There is no hope of sleeping tonight. My wakey-dial is stuck up on super-alert. I'm freaked out about going to camp in the morning, and I've got the kiss footage on a loop. I hate this. I want a more obedient brain. I want the brain that says okay when I say it's bedtime. Now, brain, sit! Rollover! Play dead. My brain says, get stuffed I'm having fun. Tonight it is like one of those lab rats that can't stop going back for cocaine even though it needs the food.

Hmmm . . . food. An excursion into the parental worst-kept-secret dark chocolate stash, in the fridge, is definitely warranted. With a freezing-cold glass of milk.

1.47 am. Brain still disobeying owner. It happened. It can't have been a dream: I haven't been to sleep. How did it happen? A yelp of disbelief makes its way up from my solar plexus to the pillow I jam against my face.

Holly almost certainly had something to do with it. She is the keen social engineer who has been trying to persuade me since year eight that I need a man in my life. (Defence strategy: eye roll, say no thank you, no way, never, not even interested, before you get scorned, rejected, ignored, not asked.)

No more than an hour after turning away, of ignoring him, of accidentally appearing to be unimpressed, I was kissing him.

Sibylla Quinn and Benjamin Capaldi?

You have got to be kidding.

Sib and Ben?

Surely not.

Heads turned. He tasted of beer and smiles and popularity, smelt of freshly danced sweat, and didn't seem to realise

it was the first time I'd kissed anyone. At least, he didn't mention it.

So the earth must be spinning off its axis by now, plummeting headlong towards a new universe, oceans sloshing and spilling, icecaps sliding, trees uprooted. Because somehow I've stepped over the line to stand with the popular girls. Only I haven't. The line must have moved without me realising. It's disconcerting. And so was the way people looked at me post-kissing-Ben. The look said *you?* Then it reassessed me. Shuffled the deck. And it was as though a different backing track started playing. I walked into the party with something like a *la-di-da*, but by the time I left it was more a *ba-boom-chucka-boom-chucka*.

A text erupts from my phone, which is packed inside a gumboot. Holly: Unless it's – it couldn't be – Ben? I dig it out, heart jerking, and remember: Ben doesn't even have my number. Of course it's Holly: *biaaatch, are you in bed with him?* Me: *you are a freak.* Holly: *as if you don't love him.* Me: *don't.* Holly: *then you're crazier than I thought, and that is lots crazy.* Me: *go to sleep.* Holly: *perchance to . . .* Me: *perchance to shut up.*



4

monday 8 october, 4 am

No news is not good news.

I know it.

Anything might have happened, and the only true fact of life is death.

It is brief. But it is nonetheless a second journal entry.

The end.

5



SEX EDUCATION USED TO be called The Facts of Life. It's kind of appropriate, the stern, newsreader tone, the headline vibe. It does loom large; it is some kind of major event on the horizon.

If you read the statistics – our house is full of them – heaps of kids have sex super early, like early secondary school, but in my little middle-class world there are plenty of kids, a lot more than half, who haven't done the deed at sixteen or even seventeen. I know that for an anecdotal fact. (I'm obviously one of them.)

Despite that, at sixteen, whether you have, or have not, had sex can sometimes feel like The Great Divide. It's not like friends who used to be close are gone, it's just that they've migrated to another country.

No matter how much you tell yourself that nothing's changed, it has. You worry that all your dumb old secrets are about to be whispered on someone else's pillow, or to be superseded by somebody else's better secrets.

Just as wide as the gulf between ‘have had sex’ and ‘haven’t had sex’ is the gulf between my fantasy life and my real life; fantasy boys and real boys.

Until last night, when I kissed my fantasy boy. That was a particularly disturbing, worlds-colliding event.

It is very frustrating, and seems illogical, that you can know everything there is to know about sex of all persuasions, variations and deviations, in theory, and yet still know zero if you haven’t done it. It. IT.

Being a virgin makes me feel inexperienced, childish, gauche, uncool.

It is honest to god like I’m sitting at the little kids’ trestle table on Christmas Day, while other girls my age are over there sipping from champagne flutes and using the good cutlery.

Add to that the pressure to act like it’s cool . . . no big deal . . . my choice . . .

And that’s *me*, and I’m not even a very peer-group person.

My virginity does not feel like some wondrous thing I will one day bestow on a lucky boy; it’s more in the realm of something I need to get rid of, like braces, before my real life can begin.

But annoyingly enough, while I am dead keen to cross ‘sex’ off my to-do list, I don’t feel at all ready to remove anything other than a top-layer garment in front of a boy. That is the reason why before I am even properly awake, the challenge, and probable impossibility, of fully clothed sex with Ben Capaldi is occupying my thoughts.

What is it going to be like seeing him today? My lips still tender, chin scratched. It had to be a casual hookup, right?

A party thing? Please, party-fling fairy, oh please visit and tell me what face to put on this morning. Friendly but distant? Casual hello hug? Ignore him before he ignores me? What was I *thinking*? We're going to be in the wilderness together for nine weeks.



6

monday 8 october, 5 am

If you don't want to write about feelings, you can write about facts, Lou.

I met Fred last year.

Our mutual friend Dan Cereill introduced us.

We saw a movie, ate boysenberry choc-tops, kissed, arranged to meet again.

I invited him to our year nine social at the end of term three.

It was a surprise.

I was not looking for a boyfriend.

We had five perfect months together.

He died in a cycling accident. He was dead at the scene, could not be resuscitated, is believed to have died instantly of head injuries.

There was a funeral.

There was scattering of ash.

I did not go back to school when the school year started. I was a basket case. Everything shut down.

This term I was to be part of a wonderful new French exchange program for government schools.

My three friends, Dan, Estelle and Janie, are part of a wonderful new French exchange program.

When it came down to it, I couldn't leave Fred.

I decided to stay in the same country as Fred.

I did not put it that way to anyone else but Dan.

It might have sounded a bit crazy but it was what I needed to do.

Dan couldn't wait to leave the city that killed Fred.

We understood perfectly well that each other's positions sprang from the same place. The place where the floor falls out from under you and nothing can ever be the same.

I have seen a psychiatrist called Esther, specialising in teenagers and grief, twice a week since Fred died.

I don't sleep well.

I don't wake well.

I have done distance education from home for the first three terms this year.

My results have been excellent.

Today I am starting at a new school, in fourth term.

I don't have to tell people about Fred unless I choose to do so.

This school is a private school called Crowthorne Grammar that sends its students away for a whole term in year ten. They/we go to an outdoor education campus called Mt Fairweather

for a whole term to discover the real meaning of, to *experience*, independence and leadership.

It is a campus in the mountains.

This cushy campus promises to provide an authentic, rugged outdoors experience . . . resilience . . . core values . . . practical skills for . . . co-curricular . . . living . . . blah . . . educational adventure . . . foster . . . blah . . . connect . . . blah . . . challenge.

A quarter of the year ten class is at Mt Fairweather at any given time. I am part of the quarter who will be enjoying the camp experience during fourth term.

There will be lots of wonderful activities in which I will participate, including but not limited to hiking, cross-country running, group and solo camping, abseiling, canoeing, horse riding and environmental studies in situ.

Classes will run in a five-day week from Thursday to Monday. Inclusive. Tuesdays and Wednesdays will be our 'weekends', so we can have the run of the wilderness without us bothering weekend hikers/campers, or weekend hikers/campers bothering us.

It will be good for me. That's an order.

Good to make a new start.

Good to get out of the house.

Good to meet new people.

Good to breathe some new air.

Good to be getting fit.

Good to have access to a fine counsellor.

So good I cannot fucking believe my luck.

7



PARENTS WERE ENCOURAGED TO say their farewells at home. Schools correctly believe hysteria to be contagious. So I get to have a whispered catch-up with Holly while everyone mills around looking excited or depressed or hungover and the sporty teachers help load the buses.

Ben is in the distance laughing with some of his aths team jock friends, guys I really don't like. Rowing and football star Billy Gardiner, with his look-at-me tan, protein-supplement-muscles and blond hair, is one of them. But I guess when you're friends with basically everyone, you're going to have some quality-control issues.

'It was nothing, no big deal.' I'm trying to mean it.

'You were practically having sex, so it's not nothing.'

'We weren't. It was just a kiss. Can we move on?'

‘Last time Ben Capaldi did that – well, the time before – it was Laura and they went out – for a while.’

‘Forget it, he’s not even my type.’ I bite a shaggy cuticle. I’ve always wanted to say that – though in this context it’s a big fat lie, and Holly knows it.

‘Your *type*? Your type is nerd meets doofus, hun, and you don’t want to go there.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What? I’m being honest,’ says Holly. I consider the mixed blessing of having such an honest friend, but there is stuff I’m clueless about, and she’s a good interpreter.

‘No, you’re right – which means Ben Capaldi is definitely not the boy for me.’

‘Don’t you get it? This is not about who you are. It’s about who you want to be. You get to decide. Because of the billboard. No one *knows* who you are anymore. The whole year level is confused.’

‘The billboard isn’t me.’

‘You haven’t tried on enough “me”s to even know.’

‘I’m Daria. I’ve even got the pain-in-the-arse little sister.’

‘You *were* Daria. Now you can be – Hannah Montana.’

‘She’s not even a cartoon.’

We both reflect on the shortage of good female cartoon role models in mainstream media. Or at least that’s what I’m doing.

‘Sibbie, you can go from drab to fab – you can be a babe, not everyone gets to do that.’ Holly sometimes speaks as though she’s rehearsing for her planned career in the world of fashion journalism.

‘Even that word – *babe* – I hate it. I don’t want to be patronised, or infantilised . . .’

Holly sighs, trying to keep her cool. ‘Think of it as a *visit* to babe-land. If you don’t like it, don’t stay.’

‘I won’t like it.’

‘You don’t know that because you’ve never been there. And Ben Capaldi is everybody’s type. If everybody wants brainy, funny, fit, handsome.’

‘If that’s true then I’ve really got no hope.’

‘You’ve got a secret weapon that no other girl has.’

‘What?’ If she means the stupid billboard, I can hardly lug that with me everywhere I go.

She’s smiling. ‘Your best friend is me.’