



'Keyes's particular gift is to make
serious things funny - and moving'

The Times

marian keyes

Anybody
Out There



PENGUIN BOOKS

Anybody Out There?

PRAISE FOR MARIAN KEYES

‘Beautifully written, funny, heartbreaking and always wise’
Daily Mail

‘It will break your heart and nourish your soul . . . No one can
evoke deep feeling with such a light touch as Marian Keyes’
Nigella Lawson

‘Comic, convincing and true’ *Guardian*

‘SUCH a treat. I felt like I was rolling in PURE JOY
throughout’ Caitlin Moran

‘Wise and witty’ *Woman’s Weekly*

‘Magnificently messy lives, brilliantly untangled. Funny, tender
and completely absorbing’ Graham Norton

‘Delightfully funny’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘There should be a word to describe the sadness and satisfac-
tion you feel when you read the last page of a Marian Keyes
novel: the ending is perfect but you still want more, more,
more’ Liane Moriarty

‘Funny, heartbreaking, achingly real’ Jane Fallon

‘No other author marries heartbreak and hilarity so seam-
lessly’ *Mail on Sunday*

‘Utterly brilliant, wise and funny’ Cathy Kelly

Copyrighted Material

‘Brilliant’ *Stylist*

‘Warm, witty and wise – a joy to read’ *Sun*

‘Keyes is an exceptional storyteller and her ability to blend comedy, high drama and emotional depth is second to none’

Daily Express

‘Charming, funny and poignant. But also profound, heartbreaking’ Nina Stibbe

‘Funny, thought-provoking and will get you right in the feels’

Red

‘Marian Keyes’s gift for storytelling is utterly magnificent’

Liz Nugent

‘Subtle, sophisticated storytelling’ *Independent*

‘Tender, hilarious, important, with characters who feel as real as your own family by the time you’re done’

Beth O’Leary

Copyrighted Material

Anybody Out There?

MARIAN KEYES



PENGUIN BOOKS
Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Michael Joseph 2006

Published in Penguin Books 2007

This reissue published in Penguin Books 2024

001

Copyright © Marian Keyes, 2006, 2024

The moral right of the author has been asserted

'Goldfinger'. Words by Leslie Bricusse & Anthony Newley. Music by John Barry.
Copyright © 1964 Sony/ATV Songs LLC, USA. Sony/ATV Music Publishing (UK) Limited.
Used by permission of Music Sales Limited. All Rights Reserved. International Copyright Secured

'It's Raining Men'. Words & Music by Paul Shaffer & Paul F. Jabara.
Copyright © 1982 Postvalda Music, Martin Bandier Music, Charles Koppelman Music &
Jonathan Three Music. All rights on behalf of Postvalda Music administered by
Warner/Chappell Music Ltd, London W6 8BS. Reproduced by permission

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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

ISBN: 978-0-241-95846-9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Tony

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

There was no return address on the envelope, which was a little weird. Already, I was slightly uneasy. Even more so when I saw my name and address . . .

The sensible woman would not open this. The sensible woman would throw it in the bin and walk away. But, apart from a short period between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty, when had I ever been sensible?

So I opened it.

It was a card, a watercolour of a bowl of droopy-looking flowers. And so flimsy I could feel something inside. Money? I thought. A cheque? But I was just being sarcastic, even though there was no one there to hear me and, anyway, I was only saying it in my own head.

And indeed, there was something inside: a photograph . . . Why was I being sent this? I already had loads of similar ones. Then I saw that I was wrong. It wasn't him at all. And, suddenly, I understood everything.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PART ONE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

I

Mum flung open the sitting-room door and announced, ‘Morning, Anna, time for your tablets.’

She tried to march briskly, like nurses she’d seen on hospital dramas, but there was so much furniture in the room that instead she had to wrestle her way towards me.

When I’d arrived in Ireland eight weeks earlier, I couldn’t climb the stairs because of my dislocated kneecap, so my parents had moved a bed downstairs into the Good Front Room.

Make no mistake, this was a huge honour: under normal circumstances we were only let into this room at Christmastime. The rest of the year, all familial leisure activities – television-watching, chocolate-eating, bickering – took place in the cramped converted garage, which went by the grand title of Television Room.

But when my bed was installed in the GFR there was nowhere for the other fixtures – tasselled couches, tasselled armchairs – to go. The room now looked like one of those discount furniture stores where millions of couches are squashed in together.

‘Right, Missy.’ Mum consulted a sheet of paper, an hour-by-hour schedule of all my medication – antibiotics, anti-inflammatories, antidepressants, sleeping pills, high-impact vitamins, painkillers which induced a very pleasant

Copyrighted Material

floaty feeling, and a member of the Valium family which she had ferried away to a secret location.

All the different packets and jars stood on a small elaborately carved table. Several china dogs of unparalleled hideousness had been shifted to make way for them and now sat on the floor looking reproachfully at me. Mum began sorting through the medication, popping out capsules and shaking pills from bottles.

My bed had been thoughtfully placed in the window bay so I could look out at passing life. Except that I couldn't: the net curtain was as immovable as a metal wall. Not *physically* immovable, you understand, but socially immovable: in Dublin suburbia, brazenly lifting your nets to have a good look at 'passing life' is a social gaffe akin to painting the front of your house Satanic black. Besides, there was no passing life. Except . . . actually, through the gauzy barrier, I'd begun to notice that most days an elderly woman stopped to let her dog wee at our gatepost. Sometimes I thought the dog, a cute black and white terrier, didn't even want to wee, but it seemed as if the woman was insisting.

'Okay, Missy.' Mum had never called me 'Missy' before all of this. 'Take these.' She tipped a handful of pills into my mouth and passed me a glass of water. She was very kind really, even if I suspected she was just acting out a part.

'Dear Jesus,' a voice said. It was my sister Helen, home from a night's work. She stood in the doorway, looked at all the tassels and asked, 'How can you stand it?'

Helen is the youngest of the five of us and still lives in the parental home, even though she's twenty-nine. But

Copyrighted Material

why would she move out, she often asks, when she's got a rent-free gig, cable telly and a built-in chauffeur (Dad)? The food, of course, she admits, is a problem, but there are ways around everything.

'Hi, honey, you're home,' Mum said. 'How was work?'

After several career changes, Helen – and I'm not making this up, I wish I was – is a private investigator. Mind you, it sounds more dangerous and exciting than it is. She mostly does white-collar crime and 'domestics' – where she has to get proof of husbands having affairs. I would find it terribly depressing but she says it doesn't bother her because she's always known men are total scumbags.

She spends a lot of time sitting in wet hedges with a long-range lens, trying to get photographic evidence of the adulterers leaving their love nest. She could stay in her warm, dry car but then she tends to fall asleep and miss her mark.

'Mum, I'm very stressed,' she said. 'Any chance of a Valium?'

'No.'

'My throat is killing me.'

Helen, on account of all the time she spends in damp hedges, gets a lot of sore throats.

'I'll bring you up ice cream in a minute, pet,' Mum said. 'Tell me, I'm dying to know, did you get your mark?'

Mum loves Helen's job, nearly more than she loves mine and that's saying a lot. (Apparently, I have The Best Job In The World™.) Occasionally, when Helen is very bored or scared, Mum even goes to work with her; the Case of the Missing Woman comes to mind. Helen went

Copyrighted Material

to the woman's apartment, looking for clues (air tickets to Rio, etc. As if . . .) and Mum went too because she loves seeing inside other people's houses. She says it's amazing how dirty they are when they're not expecting visitors. But, because her life had begun to resemble, however briefly, a crime drama, Mum got carried away and tried to break down the locked apartment door by running at it with her shoulder – even though, and I can't stress this enough, *Helen had a key*. And Mum *knew* she had it. And all Mum got for her trouble was a badly mashed shoulder.

'It's not like on the telly,' she complained afterwards, kneading the top of her arm.

Then, earlier this year, someone tried to kill Helen. The general consensus was not shock that such a dreadful thing would happen, but amazement it hadn't come to pass much sooner. Of course, it wasn't really an attempt on her life. Persons unknown threw a stone through the television-room window during an episode of *EastEnders* – probably just one of the local teenagers expressing his feelings of youthful alienation, but next thing, Mum was on the phone to everyone, saying that 'they' were trying to 'put the frighteners' on Helen, that 'they wanted her off the case'. As 'the case' was a small, office fraud enquiry where an employer had Helen install a hidden camera to see if his employees were nicking printer cartridges, this seemed a little unlikely. But who was I to rain on their parade? And that's what I would have been doing: they're such drama queens they actually thought this was exciting. Except Dad, and only because he was the one who had to sweep up all the broken glass and Sellotape a plastic bag over the hole until the glazier arrived, approximately six

Copyrighted Material

months later. (I suspect Mum and Helen live in a fantasy world where they think someone's going to come along and turn their lives into a massively successful TV series. In which they will, it goes without saying, play themselves.)

'Yes, I got him. Ding-dong! Right, I'm off to bed.' Instead she stretched out on one of the many couches. 'The man spotted me in the hedge, taking his picture.'

Mum's hand went to her mouth, the way a person's would on telly, if they wanted to indicate anxiety.

'Nothing to worry about,' Helen said. 'We had a little chat. He asked for my phone number. Cackhead,' she added with blistering scorn.

That's the thing about Helen: she's beautiful. Men, even those she's spying on for their wives, fall for her. Despite me being three years older, she and I look extremely similar: we're short with long dark hair and almost identical faces. Mum sometimes confuses us, especially when she's not wearing her glasses. But, unlike me, Helen's got some magic pull. She operates on an entirely unique frequency, which mesmerizes men; perhaps on the same principle as the whistle that only dogs can hear. When men meet the two of us, you can actually *see* them thinking: *They look the same, but this Helen has bewitched me like a drug, whereas that Anna is just so-what . . .* Not that it does the men in question any good. Helen boasts she's never been in love. She's contemptuous about everyone and everything.

Even Luke, Rachel's boyfriend – well, fiancé now. Luke is so dark and sexy and testosteroney that I dread being alone with him. I mean, he's a lovely person, really lovely, but just, you know . . . too much. I both fancy him and am

Copyrighted Material

repelled by him, if that makes sense; and everyone – even Mum, *especially* Mum – is sexually attracted to him. Not Helen, though.

All of a sudden Mum seized my arm – luckily, my unbroken one – and hissed, in a voice throbbing with excitement, ‘Look! It’s Jolly Girl, Angela Kilfeather. With her Jolly Girl girlfriend! She must be home, visiting!’

Angela Kilfeather is the most exotic creature that ever came out of our road. Well, that’s not really true – my family is far more dramatic what with broken marriages and suicide attempts and drug addiction and Helen, but Mum uses Angela Kilfeather as the gold standard: bad and all as her daughters are, at least they’re not lesbians who French-kiss their girlfriends beside suburban leylandii.

(Helen once worked with an Indian man who mistranslated ‘gays’ as ‘Jolly Boys’. It caught on so much that nearly everyone I know – including all my gay friends – now refers to gay men as ‘Jolly Boys’. The logical conclusion is that lesbians are ‘Jolly Girls’.)

Mum placed one eye up against the gap between the wall and the net curtain. ‘Give me your binoculars,’ she ordered Helen, who produced them from her rucksack with alacrity – but only for her own personal use. A small but fierce struggle ensued. ‘She’ll be GONE,’ Mum begged. ‘Let me see.’

‘Promise you’ll give me a Valium and the gift of long vision is yours.’

It was a dilemma for Mum but she did the right thing.

‘You know I can’t do that,’ she said primly. ‘I’m your mother and it would be irresponsible.’

‘Please yourself,’ Helen said, then gazed through the

Copyrighted Material

binoculars and murmured, ‘Good Christ, would you look at that!’ Then, ‘Buh-loody *bell!* Ding-dong! What are they trying to do? A Jolly Girl tonsil*ectomy?*’

Then Mum had sprung off the couch and was trying to grab the binoculars from Helen and they wrestled like children, only stopping when they bumped against my hand, the one with the missing fingernails, and my shriek of pain restored them to decorum.

After she'd washed me, Mum took the bandages off my face, like she did every day, then bundled me up in a blanket. I sat in the matchbox of a back garden, watching the grass grow – the painkillers made me super-dopey and serene – and airing my cuts.

The doctor had said that exposure to direct sunlight was strictly *verboten*, so even though there was scant chance of that in Ireland in April, I wore a stupid-looking wide-brimmed hat which Mum had worn to my sister Claire's wedding; luckily there was no one there to see me.

The sky was blue, the day was quite warm and all was pleasant. I listened to Helen coughing intermittently in an upstairs bedroom and dreamily watched the pretty flowers sway to the left in the light breeze, then back to the right, then to the left again . . . There were late daffodils and tulips and other pinkish ones whose name I didn't know. Funny, I remembered floatily, we used to have a horrible garden, the worst on the road, perhaps in the whole of Blackrock. For years it was just a dumping ground for rusty bicycles (ours) and empty Johnnie Walker bottles (also ours) and that was because, unlike other, more decent, hardworking families, we had a gardener: Michael, a bad-tempered old man who used to make Mum stand in the freezing cold while he explained why he couldn't cut the grass ("The germs get in through the cut bits, then it

Copyrighted Material

just ups and dies on you'), or why he couldn't trim the hedge ('The wall needs it for support, Missus'). Instead of telling him to get lost, Mum used to buy him top-of-the-range biscuits, then Dad used to cut the grass in the middle of the night rather than confront him. But when Dad retired they finally had the perfect excuse to get rid of Michael. Not that he took it graciously. Amid much muttering about amateurs who'd have the place destroyed within minutes, he left in high dudgeon and found employment with the O'Mahoneys where he rained shame down on our entire family by telling Mrs O'Mahoney that he'd once seen Mum drying lettuce with a dirty tea towel. Never mind. He's gone and the flowers, courtesy of Dad, are far nicer now. My only complaint is that the standard of biscuits in the house has dropped dramatically since Michael's departure. But you can't have things every way, and that realization set me off on an entirely different train of thought. It was only when the saltwater of my tears ran into my cuts and made them sting that I discovered I was crying.

I wanted to go back to New York. For the last few days I'd been not just considering it, but gripped by a powerful compulsion and unable to understand why I hadn't gone before now. The problem was that Mum and the rest of them would go mad when they heard. I could already hear their arguments – Dublin was where my roots were, where I was loved, where they could 'take care of me'.

But my family's version of 'care-taking' isn't like other, more normal families'. Mine thinks the solution to everything lies in chocolate.

At the thought of their protests, I was grabbed by

Copyrighted Material

another panicky seizure: I *had* to return to New York. I had to get back to my job, my friends. And although there was no way I could tell anyone, because they would have sent for the men in the white coats, I had to get back to Aidan.

I closed my eyes and started to drift but suddenly, like a grinding of gears, I was plunged into a memory of noise and pain and darkness. I snapped my eyes open: the flowers were still pretty, the grass was still green, but my heart was pounding and I was struggling for breath.

This had started over the past few days: the painkillers were wearing off faster than they had at the start. Chinks were appearing in the shroud of calm, then the horror rushed in, like water from a burst dam.

Struggling to my feet, I went inside where I watched *Home and Away*, had lunch (half a cheese scone, five satsuma segments, two Maltesers, eight pills), then Mum dressed my wounds again. She loved busying about with her surgical scissors, briskly cutting lengths of cotton wool and white sticky tape, like the doctor had shown her. Nurse Walsh tending to the sick. Matron Walsh, even. I closed my eyes. The touch of her fingertips on my face was soothing.

‘The smaller ones on my forehead have started to itch, that’s a good sign, isn’t it?’

‘Let’s see.’ She moved my fringe aside to take a closer look. ‘These really are healing well,’ she said, like she knew what she was talking about. ‘I think we can probably leave the bandages off these. And maybe the one on your chin. But no scratching, Missy! Of course, facial wounds are handled so well these days,’ she parroted what the doctor had told us. ‘These sutures are far better than stitches. It’s

Copyrighted Material

only this one, really.’ Gently she stroked antiseptic gel on the deep gash that ran the length of my right cheek, then paused to let me flinch with pain. Unlike the other wounds, this had dramatic Frankenstein-style stitches which looked like they’d been done with a darning needle. Of all the marks on the face this was the only one which wouldn’t eventually disappear.

‘But that’s what plastic surgeons are for.’ I also parroted what the doctor had told us.

‘That’s right,’ Mum agreed. But her voice was strangled. Quickly, I opened my eyes. She muttered something that might have been, ‘Your poor little face.’

‘Mum, don’t cry!’

‘I’m not. Anyway, I think I hear Margaret.’ Roughly, she rubbed her face with a tissue and went outside to laugh at Maggie’s new car.

Maggie had arrived for our daily walk. The second eldest of the five of us, she’s the maverick of the Walsh family, our dirty secret, our white sheep. The others (even Mum, in unguarded moments) call her a ‘lickarse’, a word I’m not comfortable with because it is so mean, but admittedly does the job well. Maggie had ‘rebelled’ by living a quiet, well-ordered life with a quiet, well-ordered man called Garv, whom, for years, my family *bated*, objecting to his reliability, his decency and most of all his jumpers. (Too similar to Dad’s, was the consensus.) However, relations have softened in recent years, especially since the children came along: JJ is now three and Holly is five months.

I will admit to having entertained some jumper-based

Copyrighted Material

prejudice myself, of which I'm now ashamed because four years ago Garv helped me to change my life. I'd reached a nasty little crossroads (more details later) and Garv was endlessly, unfathomably kind. He even got me a job in the actuarial firm where he worked – initially in the post room, then I was promoted to the front desk. *Then* he encouraged me to get a diploma in Public Relations. If I hadn't had it, I would never have ended up in my current job – The Best Job In The World™. And I would never have met Aidan.

I hobbled to the front door. Maggie was unloading children from her new car, a wide-bodied people-carrier which Mum was insisting looked like it had elephantitis.

Dad was also out there, trying to provide a foil for Mum's contempt; he was demonstrating what a fine car it was by walking around it and kicking all four tyres.

'Look at the quality on it,' he declared and kicked a tyre again to underscore his point.

'Look at the little piggy eyes on it!'

'They're not eyes, Mum, they're lights,' Maggie said, unbuckling something and emerging with baby Holly under her arm.

'Could you not have got a Porsche?' Mum asked.

'Too eighties.'

'A Maserati?'

'Not fast enough.'

Mum – I worried that she might have been suffering from boredom – had developed a sudden, late-in-life longing for a fast, sexy car. She watched *Top Gear* and she knew (a little) about Lamborghinis and Aston Martins.

Copyrighted Material

Maggie's torso disappeared into the car again and, after more unbuckling, she emerged with three-year-old JJ under her other arm.

Maggie, like Claire (the sister older than her) and Rachel (the sister younger than her), is tall and strong. The three of them come from an identical gene pool to Mum's. Helen and I, a pair of shortarses, look astonishingly different to them and I don't know where we get it from. Dad isn't terribly small, it's just the meekness that makes him seem that way.

Maggie has embraced motherhood with a passion – not just the actual mothering, but the look. One of the best things about having children, she says, is not having the time to worry about her appearance. She boasts that she has totally given up on shopping. The previous week she told me that at the start of every spring and autumn she goes to Marks & Spencer and buys six identical skirts, two pairs of shoes – one high, one flat – and a selection of tops. 'In and out in forty minutes.'

'Look at that hickey oul' skirt on her,' Mum murmured. 'People will think we're sisters.'

'I heard that,' Maggie called. 'And I don't care.'

'Your car looks like a rhino,' was Mum's parting shot.

'A minute ago it was an elephant. Dad, open out the buggy, please.'

Then JJ spotted me and became incoherent with delight. Maybe it was novelty value, but I was currently his favourite auntie. He squirmed out of Maggie's grip and rushed up the drive like a cannonball. He was always flinging himself at me and even though three days earlier he had accidentally head-butted my dislocated knee, which

Copyrighted Material

was just out of plaster, and the pain had made me vomit, I still forgave him.

He was an absolute scream. Being around him definitely lifted my mood but I tried to dial it down because the rest of them might have worried about me getting too fond of him. They might even have started with the platitudes – I was young, I would eventually have a child of my own, etc., etc. – and I wasn't ready to hear them.

I took JJ into the house to collect his 'walk hat'. When Mum had been searching out a wide-brimmed hat for me, she'd come across an entire cache of dreadful hats she'd worn to weddings over the years. For some reason JJ had fallen in love with a flat, glazed straw hat with a cluster of cherries dangling from the brim. He insisted it was 'a cowboy hat' but, really, nothing could have been further from the truth. Already, at the age of three, he was displaying a pleasing strain of eccentricity – which must have been from some recessive gene because he definitely didn't get it from either of his parents.

When we were all ready, the cavalcade moved forward: me leaning on Dad with my unbroken arm, Maggie pushing baby Holly in the buggy and JJ, the marshal, leading the party.

Mum refused to join us on this daily walk, on the grounds that 'People would be looking.' And indeed we did create quite a stir: between JJ and his hat and me and my injuries, to the local youths it was like the circus had come to town.

As we neared the green – it wasn't far, it just felt that way because my knee was so sore that even JJ, a child of three, could pass me out – one of the lads spotted us and

Copyrighted Material

alerted his pals, who abandoned whatever they'd been doing with matches and newspaper and prepared to welcome us.

'Howya, Frankenstein,' Alec called.

'Howya,' I replied with dignity.

It had upset me the first time they'd said it. Especially when they'd offered me money to lift my bandages and show them my cuts. Shocked at how cruel people could be, I'd turned around to go straight back home. Then I'd heard Maggie ask, 'How much? To see the worst one?'

A brief consultation had ensued. 'A euro.'

'Give it to me,' Maggie had ordered. The eldest one – he said his name was Hedwig, but it couldn't really be – handed it over, looking at her nervously.

'Ten per cent for me,' Maggie said. 'The rest for you. Okay. Show them.'

So I'd shown them – not for the money but because I had no reason to feel ashamed, what had happened to me could have happened to anyone. After that they always called me Frankenstein but – and I know this might sound strange – not in an unkind way.

Today they noticed that Mum had left off some of the bandages. 'You're getting better.' They sounded disappointed. 'All the ones on your forehead are nearly gone. The only good one left is the one on your cheek. And you're walking faster than you used to, you're nearly as fast as JJ now.'

For half an hour or so we sat on the bench taking the air. In the few weeks we'd been doing this daily walk, we'd been having unIrishly dry weather, at least in the daytime.

Copyrighted Material

It was only in the evenings, when Helen was sitting in hedges with her long-range lens, that it seemed to rain.

The reverie was broken when Holly started screeching. According to Maggie, her nappy needed to be changed so we all trooped back to the house, where Maggie tried, without success, to get Mum, then Dad, to change Holly. She didn't ask me; sometimes it's great having a broken arm.

While she was off dealing with baby wipes and nappy bags, JJ got a rust-coloured lipliner from my (extremely large) make-up bag, held it to his face and said, 'Like you.'

'What's like me?'

'Like you,' he repeated, touching some of my cuts, then pointing at his own face with the pencil. *Ab!* He wanted me to draw scars on him.

'Only a few.' I wasn't sure this should be encouraged, so I coloured in some half-hearted cuts on his forehead. 'Look.'

I held a hand-mirror in front of him and he liked the look of himself so much, he yelled, 'More!'

'Just one more.'

He kept checking himself in the mirror and demanding more and more injuries, then Maggie came back and when I saw the look on her face, I was filled with fear. 'Oh, God. Maggie, I'm sorry. I got carried away.'

But with a funny little jump, I realized she wasn't angry about JJ looking like a patchwork quilt – it was because she'd seen my make-up bag and got The Look, the one they all get, but I'd expected better from her.

It's been the oddest thing. Despite all the horror and grief of the recent past, most days some member of my

Copyrighted Material

family sat on my bed and asked to see the contents of my make-up bag – dazzled by my fantastic job and the fact that I, of all people, had landed it.

Maggie walked towards my make-up bag like a sleep-walker. Her hand was outstretched. ‘Can I see?’

‘Help yourself. And my washbag is on the floor here. There’s good stuff in there too, if Mum and Helen haven’t cleaned me out. Take anything you want.’

As if in a trance, Maggie was removing lipstick after lipstick from the bag. I had about sixteen of them. Just because I can.

‘Some haven’t even been opened,’ she said. ‘How come Helen and Mum haven’t stolen them?’

‘Because they already have them. Just before . . . everything, I sent the new summer products. They already have most of these.’

Two days after my arrival Helen and Mum had sat on my bed and systematically gone through my cosmetics, discarding almost everything. ‘Porn Star? Have it. Multiple Orgasm? Have it. Dirty Grrrl? Have it.’

‘They never told me about the new stuff,’ Maggie said sadly. ‘And I only live a mile away.’

‘Oh. Maybe it’s because with your new practical look they think you wouldn’t be interested. I’m sorry. When I go back to New York, I’ll send things directly to you.’

‘Will you? Thanks.’ Then, a sharp look. ‘You’re going back? Get a grip. You can’t go anywhere. You need the security of your family –’ But she was distracted by a lipstick. ‘Can I try this? It’s exactly my colour.’

She admired herself in the mirror, then was cowed by sudden remorse. ‘I’m sorry, Anna. I’ve tried to avoid asking

Copyrighted Material

to see the lovely things. I mean, under the circumstances . . . And I'm disgusted with the others, they're like scavengers. But just look at me! I'm as bad as them.'

'Don't be hard on yourself, Maggie. No one can help it. It's bigger than all of us.'

'Is it? Okay. Thanks.' She continued taking things out, opening them, trying them on the back of her hand, then closing them neatly. When she'd examined everything she sighed heavily. 'I might as well see your washbag now.'

'Help yourself. There's a lovely vetivert shower gel.' Then I thought for a second. 'No, wait, I think Dad took it.'

She sifted through the shower gels and exfoliators and body lotions, uncapping and sniffing and rubbing, and said, 'You really *do* have the best job in the world.'

My job

I work in New York City as a beauty PR. I am Assistant VP for Public Relations for Candy Grrrl, one of the hottest cosmetic brands on the planet. (You've probably heard of them; and if you haven't, it means someone, somewhere, isn't doing their job properly. I hope to Christ it isn't me.) I have access to a dizzying array of free products. I mean *literally* dizzying: shortly after I got the job my sister Rachel, who had lived in New York for years, came to my office after everyone had gone home to see if I'd been exaggerating. When I unlocked the closet and showed her the shelves of neatly stacked Candy Grrrl face-creams, pore-minimizers, concealers, scented candles,

Copyrighted Material

shower gels, bases, highlighters and . . . she stared for a long, long time, then said, ‘I’m not joking, Anna, I think I’m going to pass out.’ See, dizzying – and that was even before I told her to pick out some stuff for herself.

I am not just permitted to wear Candy Grrrl products, I am obliged to. We all have to take on the personality of the brands we represent. *Live it*, Ariella urged me, when I got the job. You are a Candy Grrrl girl, twenty-four seven, you are always on duty.

What makes it all exponentially fabulous is that it’s not just Candy Grrrl stuff I get. McArthur on the Park (founded and still owned by Ariella McArthur – she never sold out), represents thirteen other beauty brands, each more delicious than the previous. About once a month we have a souk in the boardroom, where a full and frank exchange takes place. (Mind you, this is not official policy and never happens when Ariella is around. I’d prefer if you didn’t mention it.)

And there are other perks. Because McArthur on the Park has the Perry K account, I get my hair cut and coloured for free by Perry K. Obviously, not by Perry K himself, but one of his loyal minions. Perry K, the man, is usually on a private plane, being flown by a studio to North Korea or Vanuatu to cut some filmstar’s hair on location.

(Just one thing, though: free haircuts sound fabulous but, at the risk of seeming ungrateful, I’m *obliged* to have them and I get no input: whatever is on the catwalks is what I get. Usually high-maintenance, feathery yokes which break my heart. McArthur owns my soul, which is bad enough. But to own my hair . . .)

Copyrighted Material

After Rachel's visit, she got on the blower and told everyone at home about the goodies closet. A flurry of phone calls from Ireland followed. Was Rachel back on the drugs? Or was it true about all the free cosmetics? And if it was, could they have some? Immediately, I parcelled up an indecent amount of stuff and dispatched it to Ireland – I admit it, I was showing off, trying to prove what a success I was.

When you're sending products to other people, you're supposed to 'sign them out' – every eyelash curler, every lip-balm. But if you say they're going to the *Nebraska Star*, for example, and they're really going to your mammy in Dublin, people are unlikely to check: I am a trusted employee.

The strange thing is that normally I'm very honest: if someone gives me too much change in a shop, I'll give it back. I've never done a runner from a restaurant. (Aren't there better ways to have fun?) But every time I liberate an eye-cream for Rachel or a scented candle for my friend Jacqui or send a care-package of the new spring colours to Dublin, I am stealing. Yet I have no guilt. It's because the products are so beautiful, I feel that, like natural wonders, they transcend ownership. How could you fence off the Grand Canyon? Or the Great Barrier Reef? Some things are so wondrous, everyone is entitled to them.

People often ask me, their faces distorted with jealousy, 'How do you get a job like yours?'

Well, I'll tell you.

Copyrighted Material

How I got my job

With my diploma in PR, I got a job in the Dublin press office of a low-rent cosmetic company. It was crappy money, back-breaking work – mostly stuffing envelopes for mail-shots, and as our bags were searched every evening when we left work, I didn't even have the compensation of free make-up. But I had some idea of the fun and creativity you could have in the right place, and I'd long had a hankering for New York . . .

All I had to do was convince my best friend, Jacqui, that she too had a hankering for New York. But I didn't give much for my chances. For years, Jacqui had been like me – entirely without a career plan. She'd spent most of her life working in the hotel trade, doing everything from bar work to front-of-house, then somehow, through no fault of her own, she was a VIP concierge at one of Dublin's five-star hotels. When showbiz types came to town, whatever they wanted, from Bono's phone number to a decoy double to shake off the press, it was her job to provide it. No one, especially Jacqui, could figure out how it had happened – she had no qualifications, all she had going for her was that she was chatty, practical and unimpressed by eejits, even famous ones.

Her looks might have had something to do with her

Copyrighted Material

success; she often describes herself as a blonde daddy-longlegs and, in all fairness, she is very *hingey*. She is so tall and thin that all her joints – knees, hips, elbows, shoulders – look like they’ve been loosened with a wrench, and when she walks you can almost believe that some invisible puppet-master is moving her by strings. Because of this, women aren’t threatened by her. But thanks to her good humour, her dirty laugh and her incredible stamina when it comes to staying up late and partying, men are comfortable with her.

The visiting celebs often bought her expensive presents. The best bit, she said, was when she’d take them on a shopping trip; if they bought tons of stuff for themselves they’d feel guilty into buying something for her too. Mostly teeny-tiny designer clothes which she looked great in.

Like the professional she is, she never – well, rarely – got off with the male celebs in her charge (and then only if they’d just split up with their wives and were in need of ‘comfort’), but occasionally she got off with their friends. Usually they were horrible; she seemed to prefer them that way. I don’t think I had ever liked any of her boyfriends.

The night I met her to make my pitch she showed up, her usual shiny, happy, hingey self, in a Versace coat, a Dior something, a Chloe something else, and my heart sank. Why would anyone leave a job like this? But it just goes to show.

Before I even mentioned New York, she confessed that she was sick of overpaid stars and their silly requests. She wanted a complete change, to get back to basics, to work with the poor and the sick, in a leper colony if possible.

Copyrighted Material

This was excellent, if surprising, news and the perfect time to take the US work-permit application forms from my bag; two months later, we were waving Ireland goodbye.

When we arrived in New York, we stayed with Rachel and Luke for the first few days, but this turned out to be a not great idea: Jacqui broke out in a sweat every time she looked at Luke, so badly she nearly had to start taking rehydration salts.

Because Luke is so good-looking people go a bit funny around him. They think that there has to be more to him than there is. But basically, he's just an ordinary, decent bloke, who's got the life he wants, with the woman he wants. He has a gang of lookalike pals collectively known as the Real Men. They think the last time anyone made a good record was 1975 (Led Zeppelin's *Physical Graffiti*) and that all music made since then has been unadulterated rubbish. Their idea of a big night out is the air-guitar-playing championship – there is such a thing, honestly – and although they are all gifted amateurs, one of them, Shake, showed real promise and actually got as far as the regional final.

Jacqui and I set about looking for work but, unfortunately for Jacqui, none of the leper colonies was hiring. Within a week she'd got a job in a five-star Manhattan hotel, in an almost identical post to the one she'd left behind in Dublin.

'I really wanted to do something different,' she said to Rachel, Luke and me when she came home after her first day. 'I don't know how this happened.'

Well, it was obvious: clearly she was more in thrall to that glittering, celebtastic world than she'd realized. But

Copyrighted Material

you couldn't say that. Jacqui has no time for introspection: things are what they are. Which, as a life philosophy, has its merits – although I love Rachel very much, sometimes I feel I can't itch my chin without her finding a hidden meaning in it.

Jacqui, on the other hand, is almost the only person I know who has never been on SSRIs or seen a therapist; she barely believes in PMS.

Anyway, just before Jacqui went into muscle spasm from mineral depletion from looking at Luke, we found a place of our own. A studio (i.e. one room) in a crumbling block on the Lower East Side. It was shockingly small, expensive and the shower was in the kitchenette, but at least we were in Manhattan, a tiny foothold in the naked city. Luckily, Jacqui and I could take such close proximity to each other, although sometimes Jacqui went out to bars and picked up men, just so she could have a good night's sleep in a normal place.

Right away, bearing a gorgeous, slightly embroidered résumé, I registered with several ritzy employment agencies. I had a couple of interviews but no solid offers and was just starting to worry when, one Tuesday morning, I got a call to hotfoot it round to McArthur on the Park. Apparently, the previous incumbent had had to 'go to Arizona' (NYC-speak for 'go into rehab') in a big hurry and a temp was needed urgently because they were preparing for a major pitch.

I knew about Ariella McArthur because she was – aren't they always? – a PR legend: big-haired, big-shouldered, controlling, impatient.

Copyrighted Material

So I put on my suit and showed up, to discover that the office suites really were on Central Park (thirty-eighth floor – the view from Ariella’s office is amazing, but as you’re only ever invited into her inner sanctum to be bolted, it’s hard to savour it).

Everyone was running around in a frenzy, shrieking orders at me to photocopy stuff, to organize food, to glue things to other things. Despite such shoddy treatment, I was dazzled by the brands McArthur represented and the top-end campaigns they’d run. I found myself thinking: I’d give anything to work here.

I must have glued the right things together, because they told me to come back the following day, the day of the actual pitch, when they were all even more twitchy.

At 3 p.m., Ariella and seven of her top people took up positions around the boardroom table. I was there too, but only in case anyone needed anything urgently – water, coffee, their forehead mopping. I was under instruction to not speak. Eye-contact could happen if necessary, but not speech.

As we waited, I overheard Ariella say in a low urgent voice to Franklin, her second-in-command, ‘If I do not get this account I will kill.’

For those who don’t know the Candy Grrrl story – and because I’ve lived and breathed it for so long, I sometimes forget there are people who don’t – Candy Grrrl originated with the make-up artist Candace Biggly. She began mixing her own products when she couldn’t buy the colours and textures she wanted and turned out to be so talented that the models she was making-up got all excited. Word began to filter down from The Most Fabulous On

Copyrighted Material

High that Candace Biggly's stuff was something special; the buzz had begun.

Then came the name. Countless people, including my own mother, have told me how 'Candy Grrrl' was Kate Moss's pet name for Candace. I'm sorry if this disappoints you, but it's not true. Candace and her husband, George (a creep), paid an expensive advertising agency to come up with it (also, the growling-girl logo), but the Kate story has entered popular folklore and what's the harm in letting it stay there?

Stealthily, the Candy Grrrl name began to appear in beauty pages. Then a small store opened in the Lower East Side and women who had never been below Forty-fourth Street in their *life*, made pilgrimages all the way downtown. Another store opened, this time in LA, followed by one in London and two in Tokyo, then the inevitable happened: Candy Grrrl was bought by the Devereaux Corporation for an undisclosed eight-figure sum. (Eleven point five million, actually, in case you're interested – I found it in some papers in the office last summer. I wasn't looking, I just stumbled across it. Honestly.) Suddenly CG went mainstream and exploded on to counters in Saks, Bloomingdales, Nordstrom – all the big department stores. However, Candace and George weren't 'comfortable' with the in-house public relations service Devereaux were providing so they invited some of New York's biggest agencies to pitch for the business.

'They're late,' Franklin said, fingering a little mother-of-pearl pillbox. Earlier I'd seen him not-so-discreetly pop half a Xanax, so I reckoned he was considering taking the second half.

Copyrighted Material

Then, with a surprising lack of fanfare, in came Candace, looking nothing like a Candace – brown unstyled hair, black leggings and, strangely, not a scrap of make-up. George, on the other hand, could be considered good-looking and charismatic – *he* certainly thought so.

Ariella began a gracious welcome, but George cut right across her, demanding ‘ideas’.

‘If you got the Candy Grrrl account, what would *you* do?’ He pointed a finger at Franklin.

Franklin stammered something about Madonna, but before he’d finished George had moved on to the next person. ‘And what would you do?’

He worked his way round the table and got the usual cookie-cutter PR ideas: feature coverage; a celebrity ambassador; flying all the major beauty editors somewhere fabulous – possibly Mars.

When he got to me, Ariella desperately tried to tell him that I was a nothing, a nobody, just one step up from a robot, but George insisted. ‘She works for you, right? What’s your name? Anna? Tell me your ideas.’

Ariella was in the horrors. More so when I said, ‘I saw these great alarm clocks in a store in SoHo at the weekend.’

This was a pitch for a multi-million-dollar account and I was talking about weekend shopping trips. Ariella actually put a hand to her throat like a Victorian lady planning to swoon.

‘They’re a mirror image of a regular alarm clock,’ I said. ‘All the numbers are back-to-front and the hands go in the wrong direction, they actually turn backwards. So if you want to see the right time, you’ve got to look at the clock

Copyrighted Material

in the mirror. I was thinking it would be perfect to promote your Time-Reversal Day Cream. We could do a shoutline like, “Look in the mirror: you’re reversing time.” Depending on costings we could even do an on-counter giveaway.’ (Note to the girl who wants to get ahead: Never say ‘cost’; say ‘costings’. No idea why, but saying ‘cost’ means you won’t be taken seriously. However, liberal use of ‘costings’ allies you with the big boys.)

‘Wow,’ George sat back and looked round the table. ‘Wow. The most original thing I’ve heard here today. Simple but . . . very wow! Very Candy Grrrl.’ He and Candace exchanged a look.

The high-tension mood around the table shifted. Some people relaxed but some others got even more tense. (I say ‘some others’ but I mean Lauryn.) The thing is, though, I hadn’t planned to have a great idea, it wasn’t my fault, it just happened. The only thing I will say in my favour is that I’d stopped at Saks on the way home the night before, picked up a CG brochure and learnt about their products.

‘Perhaps you might even consider changing the name to Time-Reversal *Morning* Cream,’ I suggested. But a tiny fierce headshake from Ariella stopped me. I was getting overconfident.

Lauryn tinkled. ‘Well, isn’t that the thing! I saw those alarm clocks too. I –’

‘Shut up, Lauryn.’ Ariella cut Lauryn off.

It was my finest hour. Ariella got the account and I got the job.

Copyrighted Material

Dinner *chez Walsh* was from the local Indian takeaway. I did well: half an onion bhaji, one prawn, one chunk of chicken, two okra fingers (and they're quite big), approximately thirty-five grains of rice, followed by nine pills and two Rolos.

Mealtimes had become battles of will, where Mum and Dad forced cheer into their voices, suggesting another forkful of rice, another chocolate, another vitamin E capsule (excellent for preventing scarring, apparently). I did my best – I felt empty but never hungry – but whatever I ate, it was never enough.

Exhausted by the Madras-based tussle, I retreated to my room. Something was rising to the surface: I needed to talk to Aidan.

I spoke to him in my head a lot, but now I had to hear his voice. Why hadn't this happened before? Because I'd been injured and in shock? Or too subdued by the knock-out painkillers?

I checked on Mum, Dad and Helen, who were deeply ensconced in the kind of TV detective drama they're hoping will be made out of their lives. Waving me in, they began elaborate shifting along the couch to make room, but I said, 'No, I'm fine, I'm just going to . . .'

'Grand! Good girl.'

I could have said anything: 'I'm just going to set the

Copyrighted Material

house on fire,' 'I'm just going round to the Kilfeathers' to have a three-in-a-bed-romp with Angela and her girlfriend,' and I'd have got the same response. They were in a profoundly unreachable state, similar to a trance, and would remain that way for the next hour. I closed the door firmly, lifted the phone from the hall and took it into my room.

Phones have always seemed magical, the way they pull off the unlikeliest, most geographically distant connections.

My heart was banging hard in my chest and I was hopeful – excited, in fact. Where should I try him? Not at work because someone else might pick up. His cellphone was the best idea. I didn't know what had happened to it, it might have been disconnected; but when I hit the number I'd called a thousand times, there was a click, then I heard his voice. Not his real voice, just his message, but it was enough to stop me breathing.

'Hi, this is Aidan. I can't take your call right now, but leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible.'

'Aidan.' My voice sounded quavery. 'It's me. Are you okay? Will you really get back to me as soon as possible? Please do.' What else? 'I love you, baby, I hope you know that.'

I disconnected, feeling shaky, dizzy, elated; I'd heard his voice. But within seconds I'd crashed. Leaving messages on his cellphone wasn't enough.

I could email. But that wouldn't be enough either. I had to go back to New York and try to find him. There was a chance he mightn't be there but I had to give it a go because there was one thing I was certain of: he wasn't here.

Quietly, I replaced the phone in the hall. If they found out what I'd been up to, there was no way in the whole wide world they'd let me leave.

Copyrighted Material

How I met Aidan

The August before last, Candy Grrrl were preparing to launch a new moisturizer called Future Face (and the eye-cream was called Future Eye, the lip-cream Future Lip and you get the picture . . .). Constantly on the quest for new and innovative ways to love-bomb beauty editors, I had a light-bulb-over-the-head moment and decided to buy each editor a ‘future’ to tie in with the ‘future’ theme of the launch. The obvious ‘future’ would be a personalized horoscope, but that had already been done for See Yourself In ‘Ten Years’ Time, our time-defying serum, and had ended in tears when the assistant beauty editor of *Britta* got told that she’d lose her job and her pet dog would run away within the month. (Funnily enough, although the dog stayed put, the job bit actually came true, she had a total career change and now works front-of-house at the Plaza.)

Instead, I decided to buy some of those investment things called ‘futures’. I hadn’t the first clue about them except what I’d heard about people pulling down millions of dollars working in Wall Street. But I couldn’t get an appointment with a Wall Street futures analyst, even if I’d been prepared to pay a thousand dollars for every second of their time. I tried several and got stonewalled over and over. By then I was sorry I’d ever started but I’d made the

Copyrighted Material

mistake of boasting about it to Lauryn, who'd liked the idea, so I was forced to work my way through less and less famous banks until finally I found a stockbroker in a mid-town bank who agreed to see me and only then because I'd sent Nita, his assistant, tons of free stuff, with a promise of more if she could get me in.

Along I went, taking the rare opportunity to strip myself of as many kooky accoutrements as possible. Let me explain – all McArthur publicists have to take on the personality of the brand they represent. For example, the girls who worked for EarthSource were all a bit hessiany and rough-woven, while the Bergdorf Baby team were Carolyn Bessette-Kennedy clones, so etiolated, creamy-haired and refined they were like another species. As Candy Grrrl's profile was wild and wacky, a little kooky, I had to dress accordingly. But I was so over it. Kookiness is a young woman's game and I was thirty-one.

In a navy skirt suit (admittedly dotted with silver stars but it was the most conservative thing I had), my hair gloriously denuded of all stupid barrettes and accessories, I was clapping along the eighteenth floor looking for Mr Roger Coaster's office, passing neatly dressed, efficient-looking people, and wishing I could wear severe tailored suits to work, when I rounded a corner and several things happened at once.

There was a man and we bumped into each other with such force that my bag tumbled from my grasp, sending all kinds of embarrassing things skittering across the floor (including the fake glasses I'd brought to look intelligent and my coin purse which says 'Change comes from within').

Copyrighted Material

Quickly, we bent down to retrieve stuff, simultaneously reached for the glasses and bumped our heads with a medium-to-loud crack. We both exclaimed, ‘Sorry!’ He made an attempt to rub my bruised forehead and in the process spilt scalding coffee on the back of my hand. Naturally, I couldn’t shriek in agony because I was in a public place. While I was marvelling that the coffee hadn’t done more damage, I realized that the front of my white shirt looked like a Jackson Pollock painting.

‘You know what?’ the man said. ‘With a little work, we could get a real routine going here.’

We straightened up and, despite the fact that he’d burnt my hand and ruined my shirt, I liked the look of him.

‘May I?’ He indicated my burnt hand but didn’t touch it.

‘Please.’ Apart from the red scald marks it was a hand to be proud of. I’d rarely seen it looking better. I’d been moisturizing regularly with Candy Grrrl’s Hands Up, our super-hydrating hand-cream, my acrylic nails had been filled and were painted in Candy Wrapper (silver) and I’d just been de-gorilla’ed, an event which always makes me feel joyous and skippy and carefree. I have quite hairy arms – and, God knows, this is not easy to talk about – but some of my arm hairs kind of . . . well . . . extend to the backs of my hands. The naked truth of the matter is that, unchecked, they resemble hobbit feet. (Does anyone else suffer from this? Am I the only one?)

In New York, waxing is as necessary to survival as breathing and you are only really acceptable in polite company if you’re almost entirely bald. You can have head hair, eyelashes and eyebrows, but that’s *it*. Everything else must go. Even your nasal hairs, which I hadn’t yet been able to

Copyrighted Material

face. I would have to, though – if I was planning on having a successful career in beauty.

‘I am so sorry,’ the man said.

‘A mere flesh wound,’ I said. ‘Don’t apologize, it was no one’s fault. Just a terrible, terrible, *terrible* accident. Forget it.’

‘But you’re burnt. Will you ever play the violin again?’

Then I noticed his forehead: it looked like an egg was trying to push out through his skin.

‘Oh, God, you’ve a lump.’

‘I do?’

He shifted the light brown hair that fell across his forehead. His right eyebrow was split in two by a tiny, silvery thread of a scar. I noticed it, because so is mine.

Tenderly, he rubbed the lump.

‘Ouch.’ I winced on his behalf. ‘One of the finest brains of our time.’

‘On the verge of breakthrough research. Lost for ever.’ He pronounced ‘for ever’ as ‘for evah’, like he was from Boston. Then he looked at my temporary ID badge. ‘You’re a visitor here?’ (‘visit-ah’) ‘Would you like me to show you the bathroom?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘What about your shirt?’

‘I’ll pretend it’s a fashion statement. Really, I’m fine.’

‘You are? You promise?’

I promised, he asked if I was sure, I promised again, I asked if he was okay, he said he was, then he went off with what remained of his coffee and I felt a little deflated as I carried on my way and found Mr Coaster’s office.

I tried to get Nita to explain to Mr Coaster why I was

Copyrighted Material

spattered with coffee but she had zero interest. ‘Did you bring the stuff? The base in –’

‘– Cookie Dough,’ we said together. There was a waiting list a month long for it.

‘It’s in there. Lots of other stuff too.’

She began tearing the Candy Grrrl box apart. I waited. A while later she looked up and saw that I was still there. ‘Yeah, go on in,’ she said irritably, waving her hand in the direction of a closed door.

I knocked and took myself and my dirty shirt into Mr Coaster’s office.

Mr Coaster was a short, big-swinging-dick super-flirt. As soon as I introduced myself, he gave me an overly twinkly grin and said, ‘Hey! Is that an accent I hear?’

‘Mmm.’ I gave the photo of him and – who I can only presume were – his wife and two children, a hard stare.

‘British? Irish?’

‘Irish.’ I gave the photo another meaningful eye-flick and he shifted it slightly so that I could no longer see it.

‘Now, Mr Coaster, about these futures.’

‘Now, Misthur Coaster, about dese fewchurs. I love it! Keep talking!’

‘Hahaha.’ I laughed politely, while thinking, *Fuckhead.*

It was a little while before I managed to get him to take me seriously and then it was only a matter of seconds before I discovered that ‘futures’ were more of a conceptual thing, that I couldn’t just waltz out of the door with a handful of gorgeous futures, take them back to the office, wrap them in handwoven boxes from Kate’s Paperie and have them messengered over to ten of the city’s most powerful beauty editors. But I wasn’t as disappointed as

Copyrighted Material

I should have been because I was thinking about the guy I'd bumped into. There had been *something*. And not just the synchronicity of our his 'n' hers scars. However, once I'd walked out of this building the chances were slim of ever seeing him again. Not unless I did something about it.

First, I'd have to find him and this bank was a big place. And if I did manage to locate him, then what should I do? Stick my finger in his coffee and suck it suggestively? Immediately, I ruled this out: a) the heat of the coffee might melt the glue on my acrylic nail, causing it to fall off and swim around in the cup like a shark's fin; b) it was a revolting thing to do anyway.

Mr Coaster was explaining expansively and I was nodding and smiling but I was far away inside my head, riveted by indecision.

Then, like a switch had been flicked, I fixed on a plan of action. I was suddenly certain: I was going to be upfront and honest and I decided to enlist the help of Mr Coaster. Yes, unprofessional. Yes, inappropriate. But what was to be lost?

'Mr Coaster, sir,' I interrupted politely. 'On my way in here I bumped into a gentleman, which resulted in him spilling his coffee. I'd like the opportunity to apologize before I leave. I didn't get his name but I can describe him.' I spoke quickly. 'He's tall, at least I think he is, although I'm so short everyone looks tall to me. Even you.'

Shite.

Mr Coaster's expression became stony. But I pressed on, I had to. How to describe my mystery man? 'He's pale, but not in a bad way, not like he's sick. His hair is light

Copyrighted Material

brown now, but you can tell he was blond as a baby. And his eyes, I think they might be green . . . ?

Coaster's stony face remained stony. He could have given those statues on Easter Island a run for their money. He cut in on me. 'Fraid I can't help.' And with lightning speed, I found myself outside his office, with the door shut firmly behind me.

Nita was studying herself in a compact; it looked as though she'd tried on every single product simultaneously, like a little girl who'd gone berserk in her mother's make-up drawer.

'Nita, can you help me?'

'Anna, I am totally in *love* with this gloss –'

'I'm looking for a man.'

'Welcome to New York City.' She didn't even look up from the mirror. 'Eight-minute dating. Like speed-dating, but slower. You get eight minutes instead of three. It's totally great, I got four matches last time.'

'Not just any man. He works here. He's quite tall and . . . and . . . ' There was no other way around this, I had to say it. 'And, um, beautiful. He has a tiny scar on his eyebrow and he sounds like he might be from Boston.'

Suddenly, I had her interest. She jerked her head up. 'Totally giving Denis Leary? But, like, younger?'

'Yesss!'

'Aidan Maddox. In IT. Further along this floor. Make a left, then another, two rights, then you'll see his pod.'

'Thank you. Just one other thing. Is he married?'

'Aidan Maddox? Oh, my God. No, he's not married.' She gave a little chuckle that said, And he's never likely to be either.

*

Copyrighted Material

I found him and stood by his cubicle, looking at his back, willing him to turn round. ‘Hey,’ I said, affably.

He swivelled round very quickly, like he was frightened. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Hey. It’s you. How’s your hand?’

I extended it for him. ‘I called my lawyer, the writ is on its way. Hey, would you like to go for a drink sometime?’

He looked like he’d been hit by a train. ‘You’re asking me out for a drink?’

‘Yes,’ I said, firmly. ‘Yes, I am.’

After a pause, he said, sounding perplexed, ‘But what if I said no?’

‘What’s the worst that can happen? You’ve already scalded me with boiling coffee.’

His expression was curiously akin to despair and the silence stretched too long. My confidence burst with a bang and suddenly I was desperate to leave.

‘Do you have a card?’ he asked.

‘Sure!’ I knew a rejection when I heard one.

I fumbled in my wallet and passed over a neon pink rectangle with ‘Candy Grrrl’ in red wet-look type, followed in smaller writing by ‘Anna Walsh, public relations superstar’. In the top right-hand corner was the famous growling-girl logo – an illustration of a winking girl, her teeth bared in a ‘Grrr’.

We both looked at it. Suddenly, I saw it through his eyes.

‘Cute,’ he said. Once again he sounded confused.

‘Yes, it really gives the impression of gravitas,’ I said. ‘Well, er, *sayonara*.’

I’d never before in my life said ‘*sayonara*’.

‘Yeah, okay, *sayonara*,’ he replied. Still sounding baffled. And off I went.

Copyrighted Material

So, you win some, you lose some and plenty more where he came from.

But that night I woke up at 3.15 a.m., thinking about this Aidan. I really thought we'd connected. But I'd had other intense, and ultimately meaningless, encounters in New York. Like the time the man on the subway had started talking to me about the book I was reading. (Paulo Coehlo, which I *so* did not get.) We had a great chat all the way to Riverdale, I told him so many things about myself, like my teenage preoccupation with mysticism, which I was now mortified by, and he told me about his night-time cleaning job and the two women in his life whom he was unable to choose between.

Then there was the girl I'd met at Shakespeare in the Park – we'd both been stood up so we talked to each other while we waited and she told me everything about her two Burmese cats and how they had helped her depression so much that she'd reduced her dose of Cipramil from 40 mgs right down to 10.

It's a New York thing: you meet, tell each other absolutely everything about yourself, you *genuinely* connect, then you never see each other again. It's very nice. Usually.

But I didn't want my encounter with this Aidan to be a one-off, and for the following few days I was a little expectant in every ringing-phone and incoming-email situation, but nada.

Copyrighted Material

6

Helen was clattering away at the ancient Amstrad, which lived in the hall, on top of the hostess trolley (if you wanted to sit down to send an email, you had to open the trolley doors and sit on a low stool, with your knees in the hot shelves).

‘Who are you emailing?’ I called.

She stuck her head round the door, winced at the sight of the tassels and said, ‘No one. I’m writing a thing, you know, a telly script. About a detective.’

I was speechless. Helen claimed – proudly – to be practically illiterate.

‘I might as well,’ she said. ‘I’ve plenty of material. It’s actually very good. I’ll print it off for you.’

The ancient printer screeched and squeaked for about ten minutes, then Helen ripped off a single page with a flourish and gave it to me. Still speechless, I read it.

LUCKY STAR

by and about Helen Walsh

Scene One: small proud Dublin detective agency. Two women, one young, beautiful (me). Other old (Mum). Young woman, feet on desk. Old woman, feet not on desk because of arthritis in knees. Slow day. Quiet.

Copyrighted Material

Bored. Clock ticking. Car parks outside. Man comes in. Good-looking. Big feet. Looks around.

Me: What can I do you for?

Man: I'm looking for a woman.

Me: This isn't a knocking shop.

Man: No, I mean, I'm looking for my girlfriend. She's gone missing.

Me: Have you spoken to the boys in blue?

Man: Yes, but they won't do anything until she's been gone twenty-four hours. Anyway, they just think we've had a row.

Me (whipping feet off desk, narrowing eyes, leaning forward): And have you?

Man (morto): Yes.

Me: About what? Another man? Someone she works with?

Man (still morto): Yes.

Me: She working late a lot recently? Spending too much time with her colleague?

Man: Yes.

Me: It's not looking good for you, but it's your dime. We can try and find her. Give all the details to the old woman over there.

'Excellent, isn't it?' Helen said. 'Especially the line about the knocking shop? And about it being his dime. Hard-boiled, isn't it?'

'Yes, very good.'

'I'll do more tomorrow, maybe we could even act it out. Right, I'd better get ready for work.'

Copyrighted Material

At about 10 p.m. she reappeared at my door; she was dressed for surveillance work. (Dark, close-fitting clothes that are meant to be waterproof but aren't.)

'You need fresh air,' she said.

'I got fresh air earlier.' No way was I going to sit in a wet hedge for eleven hours while she tried to catch photos of unfaithful men leaving their girlfriend's apartment.

'But I want you to come with me.'

Even though it would be hard for Helen and me to be more different, we're close: maybe it's because we're the two youngest. Whatever the reason, Helen treats me like an extension of herself, the part that gets up to bring her glasses of water in the middle of the night. I am her servant/toy/best friend and, needless to say, everything I own is automatically hers.

'I can't come,' I said. 'I'm injured.'

'Boo hoo,' she said. 'Boo bloody hoo.'

She wasn't trying to be cruel, it's just that my family don't believe in over-sentimentality. They think it makes you more upset. Brusque chivvying, making no allowances – that's their *modus operandi*.

Mum appeared and Helen turned to her in complaint. 'She won't come with me. It'll have to be you.'

'I can't,' Mum said. Dramatically, she flicked her eyes in my direction, like I was mentally ill – and blind. 'I'd better stick around here.'

'Oh, *ding-dong*,' Helen griped. 'I'm off to spend the whole night sitting in a wet hedge and none of you cares.'

'Of course we care.' Mum produced something from a pocket and gave it to Helen. 'Vitamin C sucky sweets, they might stop you getting them sore throats.'

Copyrighted Material

‘No.’ Helen squirmed away and this confirmed something I’d suspected – she actually enjoyed the sore throats, they were an excuse to stay in bed, eat ice cream and be horrible to people.

‘Take the vitamin C.’

‘No.’

‘Take the vitamin C.’

‘No.’

‘TAKE THE FECKING VITAMIN C!’

‘Christ, don’t have a cow. All right, then. But it won’t work.’

After she’d slammed out of the house, Mum got her sheet of paper and administered my final dose of pills for the day.

‘Goodnight,’ she said. ‘Sleep tight.’ Anxiously, she added, ‘I don’t like leaving you stuck down here on your own, with the rest of us all upstairs.’

‘It’s okay, Mum. I mean, with my busted knee, it’s easier for me to be downstairs.’

‘I blame myself,’ she exclaimed, with sudden emotion.

She did? Now, how did she figure that one?

‘If only we lived in a bungalow! Then we could all be together. We looked at one, you know, your father and I, before you were all born. A bungalow. But it was too far from his work. And it smelt a bit funny. But now I regret it!’

This was twice in the one day I’d seen Mum upset. Normally, she was as tough as the steaks she used to cook until we begged her to stop.

‘Mum, I’m fine. Don’t blame yourself, don’t feel guilty.’

‘I’m a mother, it’s my job to feel guilty.’ In another burst of anxiety, she asked, ‘You’re not having nightmares?’

Copyrighted Material

‘No nightmares, Mum. I don’t dream about anything.’
It must be the pills.

She frowned. ‘That’s not right,’ she said. ‘You should be having nightmares.’

‘I’ll try,’ I promised.

‘Good girl.’ She kissed me on the forehead and turned off the light.

‘You were always a good girl,’ she called affectionately from the doorway. ‘A bit odd at times, but good.’

Actually, I'm not *really* that odd at all – well, no more than anyone is. I'm just not like the rest of them. All four of my sisters are noisy and volatile and – they'd be the first to admit it – they love a good row. Or a bad row. Any kind of row, really – they've always seen bickering as a perfectly legitimate means of communication. I spent my life watching them like a mouse watches a cat, curled up small and quiet, like a tiny, fringy-skirted sandmite, hoping that if they didn't realize I was there, they couldn't start a fight with me.

My eldest three sisters – Claire, Maggie and Rachel – are like Mum: tall, fabulous women with cast-iron opinions. They seem like a different race and I make sure never to get into disagreements with them, because any puny thing I say gets dashed on the rocks of their robust, shouty certainty.

Claire, the first-born, recently turned forty. Despite this, she remains a strong-willed, upbeat type who 'really knows how to enjoy herself'. (Euphemism for 'is an unbridled party animal'.) Back in the distant past, her life had a little hiccup, when her husband, patronizing James, left her on the same day she gave birth to their first child. This meant that she had the stuffing knocked out of her for – ooh, close on half an hour, then she got over it. She met another bloke, Adam, and she had the good sense to

Copyrighted Material

make sure he was younger than her and easy to scare into submission. Mind you, she also had the good sense to make sure he was a dark, handsome hunk with lovely, broad shoulders and – according to Helen (don't ask) – a fine, big mickey. As well as Kate, the 'abandoned child', Adam and Claire have two other children and they live in London.

Second sister: Maggie, the lickarse. Three years younger than Claire, Maggie distinguishes herself by refusing to be deliberately obstructive. But – and it's a big but – she's well able to stand up for herself, and when she gets an idea into her head, she can be as stubborn as a mule. Maggie lives in Dublin, less than a mile from Mum and Dad. (See, lickarse.)

Then comes Rachel, a year younger than Maggie and the middle of the five of us. Even before Rachel began being accompanied everywhere by Luke, she used to cause a bit of a stir – she was sexy, fun, wild and her little hiccup was quite a big one, really. Probably the worst of the lot – at least, until mine. Several years ago, while she'd first been living in New York, she'd developed a fondness for the devil's dandruff. (Cocaine.) Things got very messy and after a dramatic suicide attempt, she landed in an expensive Irish rehab.

Very expensive. Mum still goes on about how she and Dad could have gone on the Orient Express to Venice and stayed in a suite at the Cipriani for a month for the same money, then she always adds quickly, but not entirely convincingly, that you can't put a price on your children's happiness.

But it's fair to say that Rachel is also probably the Walsh

Copyrighted Material

family's biggest success story. A year or so after rehab, she went to college, got a degree in psychology, then an MA in addiction studies and she now works in a rehab place in New York.

After the years she spent coked out of her head, it is very important for Rachel to be 'real'; a laudable ambition. The only downside is that she can be a bit earnest. She often talks – approvingly – about people having 'done work' on themselves. But if you scratch away at Rachel's earnestness, you don't have to try too hard before you've uncovered a version of the old person, who is lots of fun.

Next in line is me – I'm three and a half years younger than Rachel.

Then, bringing up the rear, is Helen. She's a true original – fearless, undiplomatic and wilfully contrary. For example, when she set up her agency (Lucky Star Investigations) she could have had her office in a lovely suite in Dawson Street, with a concierge and a shared receptionist, but instead she situated herself in an estate of graffiti-covered flats, where all the shops have their shutters down permanently, and dodgy-looking youths in hoodies whizz around on bikes, delivering small mystery packages.

It's unspeakably bleak but Helen loves it.

Even though I don't understand her, Helen is like my dark twin, the shameless, courageous version of me. And despite the fun she's always made of me (nothing personal, she does it to everyone) she's loyal to the point of fisticuffs.

In fact all my sisters are loyal to the point of fisticuffs, so while it's okay for them to slag each other they'd kill anyone else who tried it.

Copyrighted Material

And yes, okay, they used to say that I was away with the fairies and shout ‘Earth calling Anna,’ and that sort of thing but, to be fair, it was obvious I wasn’t too keen on reality. Why would anyone be, I used to wonder, it never seemed that pleasant a place. Any opportunity for escape I was given, I took – reading, sleeping, falling in love, designing houses in my head in which I had my own bedroom and didn’t have to share with Helen – and I was not the most practical person you could meet.

And then, of course, there were the fringy skirts.

It’s mortifying to admit, but from my late teens onwards I owned several long, hippie-type fringy skirts, some even with – oh, God! – bits of mirrors on them. Why, *why*? I was young, I was foolish, but really. I know we all have our youthful fashion shame, the badly dressed skeletons in our closets, but my time in the fashion wilderness lasted the best part of a decade.

And I gave up going to the hairdressers when I was fifteen after they sent me out with a Cyndi Lauper. (The eighties, I can’t blame them, they knew no better.) But the fringy mirrored skirts and messy hair were mere bagatelles compared to the shockwaves of the compliment slip story . . .

The compliment slip story

If you haven’t heard it already, and you probably have, because the world and his granny seem to know about it, here it is. After I left school, Dad swung me a job in a construction office – someone had owed him a favour and

Copyrighted Material

the consensus was that it must have been a pretty large favour.

But anyway, there I am, working away, doing my best, being nice to the builders who come in for petty cash, and one day Mr Sheridan, the big boss, throws a cheque on the desk and says, ‘Send that to Bill Prescott and stick a compliment slip in the envelope.’

In my defence, I was nineteen, I knew nothing of the language of administration, and luckily the cheque was intercepted before it went out in the post with my accompanying note: ‘Dear Mr Prescott, although I have never met you, I believe you are a very nice man. All the builders speak highly of you.’

No one had told me that sending a compliment slip did not actually involve complimenting anyone. I wasn’t psychic (although I wished I was). This was a mistake any uninitiated person could make, but it took pride of place in the family folklore and crystallized everyone’s opinion of me: I was the token flake.

They didn’t mean it unkindly, of course, but it wasn’t easy.

However, everything changed when I met Shane, my soulmate. (It was a long time ago, so long that it was permissible to say that sort of thing without getting sneered at.) Shane and I were delighted with each other because we thought exactly the same way. We were aware of the futures that awaited us – stuck in one place, shackled to dull, stressful jobs because we had to pay the mortgage on some horrible house – and we decided to try to live differently.

So we went travelling, which went down oh-so-badly.

Copyrighted Material

Maggie said about us, ‘They’d say they were going up the road to buy a KitKat and the next time you’d hear from them, they’d be working in a tannery in Istanbul.’ (That never happened.) (I think she must be thinking of the time we went to buy a can of Lilt and decided on a whim to skipper a boat around the Greek Islands.)

Walsh family mythology made it sound like Shane and I were a pair of work-shy layabouts but working in a canning factory in Munich was back-breaking work. And running a bar in Greece meant long hours and – worse still – having to be nice to people, which, as everyone knows, is the toughest job in the world. Whenever we came home to Ireland, it was all a bit, ‘Ho, ho, ho, here they are, the pair of smelly hippies, coming on the scrounge, lock up your confectionery.’

But it never really got to me – I had Shane and we were cocooned in our own little world and I expected it would stay that way for ever.

Then Shane broke up with me.

Apart from the sadness, loneliness, woundedness and humiliation that traditionally accompanies a broken heart, I felt betrayed: Shane had got his hair cut into something approaching respectability and had gone into business. Admittedly, it was a groovy kind of business, something to do with digital music and CDs, but after his scorning the system for as long as I’d known him, the speed with which he’d embraced it left me reeling.

I was twenty-eight, with nothing but the fringy skirt I stood up in, and suddenly all the years I’d spent moving from country to country seemed wasted. It was a horrible time. I ricocheted around like a lost soul, directionless and

Copyrighted Material

terrified, which was when Maggie's husband, Garv, took me under his wing. First, he got me a steady job and while I admit that opening the post in an actuarial firm isn't exactly scintillating, it was a start.

Then, he convinced me to go to college and suddenly my life had taken off again, moving at speed in a purposeful direction. In a short space of time I learnt to drive, I got a car, I got my hair cut into a proper, medium-maintenance 'style'. In brief, a little later in the day than most people, I got it together.