

1. *Tunnel Vision*

I love him; I love him not.

I love him... Holly decided, tearing off the virtual petals and staring across at the handsome man with the brown curls and big blue eyes... the one who'd first rocked her tiny world five years ago.

Yes, I one hundred per cent definitely love you, Lawrence Hill. Holly put the imaginary pile of 'love him not' petals to one side and stared at his silly face with fondness.

'Stand clear of the doors. Mind the gap,' came a brusque female voice, puncturing the moment.

'Wow. She's in a grump today.'

Lawrence smiled from across the carriage. 'You realise it's just a recording? She's not real?'

'She probably was, once...' Holly mused, a scene unfurling in her mind of a glamorous actress in a Soho sound booth, trying out different tones – from jovial to breezy, to downright matronly.

'Fair,' Lawrence said, staring at the Tube map like it was some kind of exciting code to be cracked. 'But in other news, we need to get off in a minute.' He grabbed his denim jacket off the floor.

Holly pressed pause on the sound session and looked up at the map. 'No we don't.'

‘Yes. Ours is the next stop,’ he said with the over-focused determination of Rain Man.

‘But we’re nowhere near Tufnell Park.’ She gave Lawrence a knowing smile, her left dimple popping out as she did. ‘Ah, but my dear Folly, that is a simplistic way of looking at things.’

‘Why’s that then?’ She moved into the proverbial brace position.

Adopting an old-fashioned BBC accent, Lawrence went on, ‘We should alight at Stockwell and change to the Victoria line.’

Holly’s brow furrowed. ‘Or, surely we just get the Northern line all the way to Tufnell Park?’

Lawrence smiled knowingly and shook his head. He began picking at the dilapidated shell-top of his left trainer. He pulled at the rubber flaps until they were dislodged, at which point he looked up.

‘Of course,’ his eyes widening with his trademark blend of smugness and childish excitement, ‘that is what London Transport’s Flawed Journey Planner would have you believe. However, I might remind you that there are a limited number of secret shortcuts and portals on the underground network, which only the truly seasoned Londoner is privy to.’

‘Wow. You have literally never been sexier.’

He grinned with pride. Lawrence, for all his charms, suffered from a rare yet socially debilitating condition known as Tube Tourette’s. Having grown up in the Midlands, Holly was distinctly less interested in Tube trivia than Lawrence. His fascination for it was so all-consuming, she firmly believed that under his skin were not veins or arteries, but a full replica of the London Underground map (first designed by underground electrical draughtsman Harry Beck in 1933, he’d hurry to tell you, too).

‘The Northern line boasts two such changes,’ he went on. ‘One at Stockwell, and another at Euston. While they might appear pointless at first, these two changes will actually shave off a substantial section of your journey time. Not to mention the fact

that the Northern line is heinously unreliable, frequently beset by the twin evils of signal failure and engineering works.' Holly let out a small sigh. Being an avid book-reader (a fact she loved about Lawrence), he had a habit of talking as if he was choking on a thesaurus (a fact she loved less so). There was a time when this had charmed her. Now it just niggled at her sanity.

'Lawrence you douche, just give it to me in English.'

'We'll cut out loads of time if we change lines here. FACT.'

'I have seventeen bags with me after staying at yours. I don't fancy changing trains and schlepping all this about.'

There comes a moment in most long-term relationships when you realise your identity has irreversibly eroded. You might have been a relatively normal individual once, breezing in and out of buildings, nothing but a shoulder bag about your person. But five years into a relationship in a big city, and you're The Bag Lady of the Northern Line – lugging around so much in the way of work clothes, unwashed gym wear and toiletries that you practically need your own carriage. Holly had recently begun duplicating all her worldly goods for North and South London. She'd had to call time on the doppelganger cosmetics project shortly after shelling out for the second set of GHD hair straighteners. Still, anything to avoid actually moving in with Lawrence.

As the train drew nearer to Stockwell and the first of Lawrence's shortcuts, he shifted about in his seat.

'OK, if you're so bothered, why don't you go?' Holly said sarcastically. 'I'll meet you there.'

Lawrence's big blue eyes widened. He stood up. 'OK, here's the plan. No really, this'll be fun. You take the Northern line all the way. I'll change to the Victoria line and back again. Then finally we'll know the DEFINITIVE answer of which is quicker! This age-old debate will have been answered, once and for all!'

'Oh, Lawrence... I was kidding. Please sit down,' she scolded before noticing that they now had an audience the size of a small

fringe venue. All they needed now was a man in a tux selling programmes and overpriced ice creams.

‘Aren’t you just a bit curious to know who’s right?’ Lawrence said. As he dispatched one of his daintier breeds of kisses onto her forehead (the ones he liked to call ‘fairy kisses’ when no one else was listening), she couldn’t stop the smile from creeping across her face.

Lawrence shot up from his seat, his eyes pogoing with excitement. The doors were opening. The old lady across the carriage seemed, from her enormous grin, to be egging them on.

‘You’re a freak,’ Holly replied by way of acquiescence. Then, reluctantly: ‘But listen, this has to be a fair test. We walk at a normal pace. No running up the escalators!’

Lawrence nodded. ‘I love you,’ he whispered, the doors beeping.

‘Love you too. Twat,’ she said as he bounced off the train and the doors began to close.

Flushed with a mixture of anxiety and humiliation, Holly Braithwaite watched as Lawrence stepped onto the platform and grinned back at her. Then she pulled into a tunnel deep beneath the River Thames, sank into the tired upholstery and leaned against the window.

She pictured the scene of her boyfriend sitting on the other train, staring with intent at the stopwatch on his phone. Lawrence’s diehard competitiveness was one of the things that most riled her about him. Or was it loved? Who knew, she wondered as she pulled her black beret out of her bag and folded it into a makeshift travel pillow. She wedged it beneath the cushion of her thick brown hair, and rested her head against it. She listened to the voice reading out the names of the stops and closed her eyes. She began replaying the imaginary scene of the actress in the sound booth. She’d had that slightly clipped, RP accent, evocative of another era. Perhaps she’d done the recording many years ago, dressed in forties get-up, her hair in victory rolls? She couldn’t help smiling, until a bleak thought occurred. The recording

sounded so dated that there was a strong chance the owner of the voice was no longer alive. In which case, these slightly tetchy TFL announcements could be the only echo of her that remained in this world? Her legacy. Holly struggled to think what she'd be remembered for, were she to shuffle off this mortal coil right now. An insalubrious flat-share, a dysfunctional relationship, and an intellectually emaciated TV show about a regional discotheque. Ball bags, Holly thought, looking upwards with pleading eyes and hoping it wasn't too late for her to make a proper contribution to the world.

Half an hour later, the train reached Tufnell Park. Holly rubbed her eyes and breathed a quiet sigh of relief to be north of the river again, and closer to home. Leaving the platform, she found herself jumping the stairs two at a time. She cleared the Oyster machines and ran through the ticket hall, where she could see that – bugged it – Lawrence was standing beside a lamp post on the street. She could tell by the position of his thumbs and the rapid movement of his eyes that he was playing Candy Crush on his phone. As she walked towards her man, she began playing a favourite game of her own, imagining it was the first time she'd ever seen him. She pretended to check him out, to assess if she still wanted to jump the bones of this stranger before her. She surveyed the optimum amount of stubble across his face and the dark brown hair that was perennially in the just-got-out-of-bed style. She studied his tall build – athletic without even trying – and his weathered Che Guevara T-shirt. She smiled. Yep, he definitely still had it. Despite being annoying in a multitude of ways, Lawrence Edward Hill could still turn her stomach to mush.

'See?' Lawrence said without looking up, his voice drunk with 'I told you so'.

'All right, well done.'

He stared at her expectantly.

'Yes, you were right.'

He smiled. ‘So, since I won, maybe you can get the wine for dinner?’

‘You’re all charm,’ Holly said, poking him in the ribs, then beginning to walk up the road.

‘But not just yet...’ he said, tugging at her arm. He bent down to kiss her and they smooched under a street lamp like teenagers.

‘Hey,’ Holly said, breaking away. ‘Don’t laugh, but, if for instance I should, you know, die in some sort of freak accident tomorrow – what would you remember most about me? My eyes? My voice?’

Lawrence’s thick brown eyebrows crinkled towards each other. ‘Well, since you ask, your laugh. I think it’s the most beautiful sound ever. But what is this? Have you gone wonky with motion-sickness again?’

‘I just got a bit hypnotized by that Tube announcer’s voice, hearing it over and over. I didn’t have a book to read, so for some reason I went off on one, and started overthinking things.’

‘That doesn’t sound like you,’ he said, before smiling, ‘although, you did have a much longer journey than me.’

‘Ha ha, very funny,’ Holly said, as they walked hand in hand towards Boozenest – the 24-hour convenience store she lived above with her two flatmates.

‘But just imagine, what if you actually knew her? What if you were her boyfriend and she’d up and left you one day? Would it be really painful hearing her voice every time you travelled? Or – what if she did these recordings years ago, and now she’s six feet under?’

Holly crouched on the pavement and began opening bags at random. Lawrence bent down to assist her in The Great Key Hunt. ‘Well, if that were true, it’d be a bit like she’s been accidentally immortalised by Transport for London.’

‘Exactly! I mean, imagine if she’d left behind a widower. Do you think the poor guy would ride the Northern line, just to hear her voice again, as a way of being with her again in some way?’

Or maybe he'd always avoid it, as it would be too painful?

'The Northern line is always painful,' Lawrence said as his fingers pulled out something sharp and metal. 'Et voilà!'

Holly smiled, took the keys from him and began unlocking the door, just as her phoned beeped with a message.

'Shut the front door!' she said, stopping on the stairs to re-read the text.

'I just did,' Lawrence replied, shooting her a puzzled look before noticing her mouth drop open. 'Oh. What's up?'

'It's Olivia. No wonder she wanted to come over for dinner all of a sudden. She's just broken up with her boyfriend. I can't believe it. She and Ross were an institution at university.'

'How awful. Who's Olivia?'

'You know Olivia. From Uni. Wow, I really thought they were in it for the long haul,' she mused as they stood up and began to hike up the stairs.

'Hello?!' Holly shouted over a booming Ella Fitzgerald song as they reached the internal front door and she pushed it open. They headed up more stairs, past a tapestry of Blu-Tacked posters of film and music icons. On first moving in to 249a Fortess Road, Holly's long-term flatmate Bella, had been outvoted on the motion to only display pictures in frames from now on 'We're not students anymore', Holly and her other flatmate Daniel had pointed out. But slowly, as if by osmosis, new Blu-Tacked posters had begun appearing every few months.

Holly wandered into the lounge and through the kitchen, looking towards the small roof-terrace where Bella was smoking. Seeing her flatmate, she thought again how fine the line was between fancy dress and Bella's style preferences. A slave to vintage, Bella was dressed head to toe in fifties housewife chic, from the red and white polka-dot apron pinching in at her waist, to the Routemaster-red lips and heels.

'We have wine!' declared a triumphant Holly, opening the bottle and popping it onto the kitchen table to let it breathe.

Then she bent down to the speakers, turned down the insanely loud Ella, and headed outside, kissing Bella on the cheek. She stood on the terrace and took in the staggering view of North London trees and rooftops, remembering again why they'd chosen to live at the top of so many flights of stairs.

'Sorry, it took forever to get here from zone twenty. We've left you to do all the dinner. Can we help now?'

'Oh, crap!' Bella stubbed out her cigarette and headed back into the kitchen where some pots were just starting to bubble over. Next to the hob there was a cavalcade of crumbs, empty tofu packaging, stray lentils and shards of purple sprouting broccoli. Bella began stirring the lentils with one hand while applying mascara with the other, using the kitchen window as a mirror.

'No, it's all under control. Just open some wine. Who's this friend of yours that's coming over again?'

'Olivia. We were in halls together at university. She's down in London this weekend,' Holly said, attempting to fold napkins in a way that didn't look entirely eighties. 'She stayed up in Manchester after graduation, which is why we don't see that much of each other. That, and she's been mummified in a relationship for the last seven years. But apparently they've just broken up, so...'. Holly looked at Bella to make sure she was paying attention, '...so she's probably going to be a little fragile right now,' she warned just as the doorbell rang.

'Liv!' she squealed into the intercom. 'Hey love. Come on up.'

Some moments later, Olivia Mahoney appeared under the curved archway next to the kitchen. Unlike Holly and Lawrence, who had both emerged from the stairs looking like they'd just been traversing the Pennines, Olivia was barely out of breath.

'Hello!' she sang, with a smile that made everyone stop what they were doing. Olivia had always been disarmingly stylish, but today she appeared to have actually been curated by Dolce & Gabbana themselves – if her freshly straightened mahogany hair and immaculate shift dress that perfectly highlighted her curves

– were anything to go by. In short, this was not the look of a recent refugee from Dumped Ville, Tennessee.

‘Holly! It’s been so long! Oh my days, you look so healthy!’ she said, going in for a hug.

‘Thanks,’ Holly smiled, wondering mid-hug whether to take this as a compliment, or some sort of backhanded suggestion of weight gain.

‘I’m so sorry to hear about you and Ross,’ Holly lamented as she squeezed her tight, ‘how are you coping?’

‘Oh! I’m fine, really,’ Olivia said, disentangling herself, ‘actually, I’m sort of loving all this free time I’ve got now. And it’s given me a great excuse to move back to London. Didsbury is lovely and all, but it can be a bit provincial.’

‘Liv,’ Holly said, ‘this is the lovely Bella, one of my flatmates. We met when we temped together at a bleak call-centre after uni.’

Bella took Liv’s hand and shuddered. ‘Oh God, don’t remind me! “Good afternoon, may I speak with the named homeowner?”’ she said in her best admin nasal. ““Are you entirely happy with your current broadband provider?” Aaaahh! Kill me now!’ she yelled, curtailing her skit at the sight of Olivia’s muddled expression.

Meanwhile Lawrence had wandered in. Apparently in some kind of hunger trance, he walked towards the fridge, opened it and leaned in to study the contents.

‘And this is Lawrence,’ Holly said, sounding apologetic. ‘We’ll be eating soon, Lawrence.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Lawrence said, shutting the fridge and turning to face Olivia. ‘Sorry to hear about your break-up and all.’

‘Oh, thanks, but as I was just saying to Hol, I’m fine about it, really. We’d definitely reached the end of the line,’ she said, blinking while running through a word-perfect speech about all the benefits of being single – and how her newfound free time meant she could now take up all the things she’d secretly been

craving. Just as she was immersed in the virtues of learning your way round the stock market, Bella inserted a glass of wine into her hands a little too forcefully.

‘So Liv, tell me to shut up if you’d rather not go there, but what happened?’ Holly said. ‘Last I remember, you and Ross were really happy?’

Olivia inspected her nails. Sensing a girl chat brewing, Lawrence grabbed his bag of tobacco and retreated to the terrace.

Olivia sighed. ‘All right. I’ll talk about it – for five minutes, max – then we’ll move on to something more interesting!’ She took a large sip of wine. ‘So, as you may recall, Ross is something of a computer boffin. Sorry, was,’ she added a beat later, remembering with a jolt he belonged to her past tense now.

‘Geeks can be hot though,’ Bella said, ‘what did he do for a living?’

Olivia smirked. ‘If you really want to know, he was a “Backend Developer”’.

Bella snorted. ‘That’s never a real job title.’

‘I’m afraid it is. I think it means he does coding for websites. But don’t quote me.’

A mobile phone on the table began to flash and vibrate, and Olivia’s skin tone turned a few pantones lighter.

‘Is it he?’ Bella asked, leaning forwards. She picked up the mobile and examined the flashing photo. Then she looked at Olivia and grinned. ‘Wait, *that’s* your Ross?’

Olivia nodded.

‘Well, he can backend develop me, anytime...’

‘Bella!’ screeched Holly, elbowing her in the ribs.

Olivia gave a knowing smile. ‘He’s all yours,’ she said, retrieving the phone and cancelling the call. She put it back into her bag and for a nanosecond looked wistful.

‘You’re not going to talk to him?’ Holly asked.

Olivia shook her head; her eyes belying more grief than she perhaps wanted them to. ‘No. When it’s over, it’s over,’ she said

as the phone made a loud beep from within her bag. ‘Stick a fork in it, I say.’

‘You’re not even going to see what that is? He’s probably left a voicemail?’ Holly said.

‘Nah.’

No surprises there, Holly reasoned, remembering how at university they’d always joked that Olivia must have been having a cheeky manicure the day God was dishing out the batches of needy female hormones. Which went some way to explaining why the last time Holly had seen her, Olivia had declared herself in the midst of a ‘friendship audit’. Although Holly had been spared this time around, Olivia’s plan had been to prune away anyone peripheral, Facebook or otherwise, that she hadn’t seen in a year. One by one, she had called up each unsuspecting friend for a fond farewell, in the hope that streamlining her social life would have a Zenifying effect. Now that Olivia was newly single, Holly couldn’t help wondering whether she might be regretting the mass cull.

‘So you were telling us what happened?’ Bella said.

Olivia rolled her eyes like a child being told she had to eat her peas before any pudding. ‘All right then. Just quickly. So, as you know, he was a bit of a computer nerd – which was sexy in the beginning. You know, he had a proper geek-chic thing going on. But then he went freelance, set up his own company, and it all changed. He started working from home a lot more, sleeping in and working late. Then one day he just stopped getting dressed at all – he’d just sit around festering, in these rancid jogging bottoms. Until eventually, you couldn’t tell where the pyjamas ended and the tracksuits began.’

‘Wow, that’s so strange,’ Holly said. ‘He was Mr Charisma at uni.’

‘I know,’ Olivia’s eyes moistened as she threw back the rest of her glass of wine. Then like Olivia Twist, she held out the empty receptacle in front of Holly, who immediately filled it up.

‘I remember,’ chimed in Holly, ‘he was *that guy* in Fresher’s week. The one every girl wanted to... you know, and every guy wanted to be.’

‘But it’s easy to be nostalgic about Old Ross – before he killed his personality off with a lethal concoction of daytime TV and JavaScript.’

‘So what did you do? How did it end?’ Bella tipped her head to one side, her empathy palpable.

‘Fairly predictable stuff. Me saying I thought he’d let himself go, that I just didn’t love him anymore, and we’d grown apart, blah blah... Him saying, “Shit, Olivia, I’m sorry. I wish I could just press Control Z.”’

‘No way,’ Holly said, while Bella’s brow furrowed.

‘That’s Apple Z, for the benefit of Mac Monks. As in, to undo?’ she added, and Bella’s brow un-furrowed. ‘Yes. So then I said, “Ross. I think we both know, it’s a case of Control Alt Delete now.”’

‘Well,’ Holly began, ‘it sounds like you’ve done the right thing. It must feel like such a massive shock to your system though, after seven years.’

‘It’s been brewing for a long time – it’s a relief to have finally done it.’

‘So where are you going to live now?’ Holly asked. ‘Do you want to come and stay with us?’

‘Oh thanks, but I’m staying with my parents in Hampstead for a bit; just while I get myself sorted with a new job down here. But chances are, I’ll only be allowed a week in the show home before I’ll have to be out again!’ Olivia smiled, then covered her ears as the incredibly loud smoke alarm began to go off.

Bella leapt up. ‘That’s dinner!’ She poked her head in the oven. At the sight of smoke she began turning off all the knobs and dials. Holly began prodding at the smoke alarm with a broom to make it stop. This was all done with complete composure, as though it was an everyday ritual.

‘So, everyone, dinner’s kind of a buffet type thing. Just pile on,’ Bella said, as she handed out partially-chipped plates to everyone.

‘Looks amazing, thanks,’ Holly said, spooning some of the blackened food onto her plate and assessing it for carcinogens. ‘Is Daniel not eating with us?’ said Holly.

‘No, he’s got a night shift at the hospital again, poor bastard,’ Bella said.

‘Ah, shame,’ Holly said, secretly thinking it might have been handy to have a member of the medical profession on standby, but then feeling guilty for being so mean and having done nothing to help prepare dinner. She watched Lawrence digest a whole mouthful before taking one of her own.

Olivia picked up a fork full of food, but then opened her mouth to carry on speaking: ‘But anyway, a friend of mine is just about to put his gorgeous flat in Dalston on the market, so if Ross can buy me out of our flat in Didsbury in time, I’ll be able to nab that and move straight in!’

Bella’s eyes widened. ‘Dalston? As in, East London?’

To Bella, East London was a hallowed kind of a place. Legend had it, it was where all the hot men in London were being kept. Bella had stumbled across it one day while navigating a Walk of Shame through an unknown neighbourhood somewhere North of Bethnal Green. Quite by accident, she’d found herself in a quaint little strip called Broadway Market. It was all fancy deli stalls, fit-as-fuck buskers, and dashing men with oversized spectacles on fixed-gear bikes. Ever since then, there was sometimes talk in hushed tones of ‘going East’, as if it was some kind of promised wonderland. Bella would bring up the notion of warehouse parties in Dalston once in a while, but the thought of venturing somewhere new always lost out to the easy walk home from the local.

‘Anyway, Liv,’ Holly said, feeling the need to change the subject, ‘if I can say so, you seem to be doing very well considering.’

‘You really are,’ Bella said, ‘I mean, if it was me, I’d be needing round-the-clock care to help me do basic things like getting dressed and swallowing solids.’

‘Yeah well, when you know, you know,’ Olivia said.

‘Any more, Liv?’ Holly said, holding out more food towards her.

‘Oh no, I’m stuffed,’ Olivia said, slotting her knife next to her fork and laying it to rest. Her plate looked as full now as it had at the start of the meal, only everything on it appeared to be in a slightly different position. ‘That was great though, thank you!’

Some hours later, they had retreated to the lounge. Lawrence was snoozing on the faded blue sofa in a post-gluttonous coma. Olivia sat perfectly upright next to him, staring at her phone, and Bella was picking at the yellow strips of foam that were leaking out of the sides of the sofa like oven chips. Over time, the hole had grown so large that these chips were now a regular feature of the lounge décor. Lawrence was forever coming into the kitchen after a big night out, picking them off the floor and going to eat them in his drunken stupor. Then, once Holly reminded him they had slightly less nutritional value than their real-life counterparts, he would drop them back onto the floor. But not before placing one of them on her shoulder and saying, ‘Look, you’ve got a chip on your shoulder.’ Every time.

‘We really should stitch up that hole. Can anyone sew?’ Holly said.

Naturally, Bella did not respond. Her filter for all things domestic was now so advanced, the vibrations of Holly’s speech were physically shielded from penetrating her eardrum and making the journey to the middle ear. Instead, she stood up, a puddle of chips at her feet, and began the preparations for a round of Analogue Netflix. This was a game Bella had devised some time ago, borne out of her reluctance to pay for what she called ‘special television’, and her belief that they should all learn to appreciate the one thousand films they already owned between

them. In reality they spent far more time deciding what to watch than they did watching anything, so in many ways it was exactly like the real Netflix.

Bella stretched up towards the Jenga-like tower of DVDs and plucked some out at random, as Holly began laying them out on the coffee table. Bella started calling out titles.

‘OK, so what have we here... *The Notebook*.’

‘Nope. Boring, saccharine, predictable...’

‘It’s beautiful!’ Bella said, staring daggers at Olivia.

‘*Pride and Prejudice*?’

‘Too long. And too... period,’ Lawrence said, rubbing sleep dust from his eyes.

‘How about... *The Curious Case of—*’ Olivia began.

‘Benjamin Boring? The film that editing forgot?’ Holly said.

‘*Love Actually*.’

‘Um, get a life, actually,’ Holly said, and Lawrence nodded in agreement.

‘But it’s a wonderful film,’ Bella insisted. ‘So affirmative of the power of love as life’s great leveller—’

‘If I can just stop you there, Miss Bella. I’ve nothing against Richard Curtis per se,’ Lawrence began to pontificate, ‘I mean, let’s be honest, *Blackadder* was pure televisual perfection. But the trouble with *Love Actually* – nay, the whole Curtis canon – is that he’s clearly being paid by the people at Visit Britain to promote a wildly inaccurate view of London to the rest of the world. Take *Notting Hill*. There is no way the character William Thacker would be able to afford to live in such an attractive period property – with a gargantuan roof terrace – in the real Notting Hill. I mean, let’s be real here: HE WORKS IN AN INDEPENDENT BOOKSHOP!’

Lawrence was getting more irate than was probably necessary. Holly felt her stomach constrict, and looked round the room to see if anyone else had noticed him being a little too shouty.

‘But maybe house prices shot up after the film? Maybe Notting

Hill used to be like Hackney?’ Bella posed, desperately still wanting to believe.

‘Hey, you know what would be fun?’ Holly began, her eyes on Lawrence. ‘We should make a tongue-in-cheek mash-up of all the Curtis films, where the characters live in properties which actually correspond to their income. So, let’s see... Will Thacker would live in an ex local authority one-bed in Kensal Rise, with a Juliet balcony at best.’

Lawrence laughed. ‘Yes! And we’d replace all the friendly cabbies and romantic Routemasters with those charmless new buses with grumpy drivers that refuse to stop for you.’

‘We’ll have it raining the whole time! And we’ll call it Stamford Hill!’

‘Perfect! And *Love Actually* could be – Dumped Actually,’ Lawrence said, smirking.

‘Or, Shat on from a Great Height, Actually!’ Holly added, and they both fell about laughing.

‘Yeah, yeah. Whatever,’ Bella said. ‘So. Anyone for *Four Weddings?* Oldie but a goodie?’

Holly began to realise she and Lawrence were outnumbered. An hour and twenty minutes later, she was feeling her usual bout of nausea at the scene where Hugh Grant and Andie MacDowell kiss in the rain, when she noticed Lawrence’s eyelids closing out of the corner of her eye, his wine glass hanging off his fingers at a precarious angle. In slow motion, she saw his fingers relax and the glass slip, sending Shiraz cascading to the floor. As everyone leapt up to try and stem the tide with a whole roll of extra-quilted kitchen roll, Holly reached a conclusion. It was time to take Lawrence to a place where other people were not.

Twenty minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom and smiled. Once again Lawrence lay on top of her bed, eyes closed, with all his clothes on. His muddy Adidas trainers hung off the edge of the bed. A trickle of drool was slowly wandering from his lips and onto her freshly laundered pillowcase.

‘Lawry...’ she said, peeling off her clothes and hopping into bed beside him. She kissed him on the back of his neck, noticing that, as ever, he smelled very strongly of unwashed hair. She told herself this was sexy and manly, and not that Lawrence was a disciple of the ‘your hair starts to clean itself after a while’ gospel of hair care.

She began unlacing his shoes, rolling down his jeans and unbuttoning his shirt.

‘Hey, I’m fine,’ he said, as though bidding his manservant off duty.

‘Oi,’ she said, resorting to prodding.

After a few more inaudible grunts that sounded like ‘No... sleeping...’, he turned his back to face the wall and resumed snoring. Following a couple more failed attempts at erotic coercion via the means of spooning and shiatsu, Holly gave up and turned around so they could do that less talked about but equally popular sexual position – the back-to-back ‘we’re in a strop’ position, where they remained for some time. Occasionally, their bare bottoms made contact, but they quickly moved apart on impact as though electrically repelled.

An hour later, she felt someone kissing the back of her neck.

‘Hey. I miss you.’

‘I’m right next to you,’ she said, but she knew what he meant.

She felt his arms tighten around her. She turned to face him and they shared a slow, sleepy kiss.

‘Meet me somewhere?’ he said when they stopped. ‘Old Havana?’ His eyes closed again, his last words dispatched.

Holding his head to her chest, she closed her eyes and thought of vintage motor cars, cigars and salsa dancers and everything else they knew about the city they planned to visit together. She attempted to teleport herself there, to join him in his sleep-world. This wasn’t a low-budget version of *Inception*; it was a game they’d invented when they first got together. It had been one of those nights where they’d laid together talking and cuddling all

night, amazed at having found each other and wondering how other couples ever got any sleep. This had been their way to make parting for sleep just that bit easier: to pretend they would meet in their dreams.

Sometimes it didn't work so well. Tonight in particular, there was heavy congestion on the teleporting highway. Five hours later, Holly was staring vacantly at the ceiling, listening to the busy traffic noises of Holloway, not Havana. She closed her eyes as she heard the recycling van belting out its one-hit wonder, 'Stand Clear. Vehicle reversing'. Sometimes the traffic was so unfeasibly loud that she had to check her mattress wasn't actually in the middle of the road.

After a while, she became aware of how spectacularly un-tired she was, and lay watching Lawrence snoring blissfully away. Attempting to locate some inner yogic calm, she tuned in to the rise and fall of her boyfriend's snores. Loud to soft. Heavy breathing to quiet breathing, then back to blissful silence. Another chorus of heavy breathing, a guttural snort, then back to more quiet breathing. Holly listened to this on a loop for hours, wondering when she'd first become an insomniac. Gradually, the room stopped being so dark, and Lawrence's snoring solo found some backing singers in the baby blackbirds outside her window.

Two hours later, she switched off her alarm and wanted to weep at the time. She stared down at Lawrence sleeping and whispered, 'Lawry, I've got to go. See you later.'

A freckly and toned forearm emerged from under the covers, attempting to pull her back into the warm, feathery world under the duvet. Half asleep, he planted kisses on her cheeks, moving down to her neck.

'Hey, I've got to go to work,' she said as he drew her further inside and pulled the duvet high above their heads. He tucked it round them, so they were hidden from the world, in their own dimly lit universe. And then she remembered. When things were good with Lawrence, there was nowhere she'd rather be than

under the duvet with him. Hiding from responsibility, from pretending to be a grown-up.

‘Stay.’

‘I can’t. It’s only my second week!’ she said as he planted kisses on her stomach. She pulled in her non-existent abdominal muscles. ‘I’ve got to try and be in early as I don’t think my new boss is terribly impressed with me. My first episode ended up over length, when I forgot to allow for the extra ad-breaks they have on Sky!’

Lawrence looked at Holly, his eyes hazy with sleep. ‘But you can’t go – I’ll miss you too much.’

‘But I need to try and make a better impression.’ Mustering all her willpower, she lifted the lid on their private universe, letting the cold air to their faces. It was a wrench, but slowly she untangled herself from the covers and peeled herself out of bed. She kissed him goodbye, feeling a tinge of pain.

‘I love you,’ mumbled Lawrence through slumber, his eyes closed.

‘Love you too.’

‘Love you three,’ he said as he sank into sleep.

Holly smiled and tucked in the covers around him so he was all sealed up and no cold air could sneak in. She stood watching him sleep; his brown curls splayed out over the pillow, his long eyelashes twitching as he dreamed. She thought how adorable he looked, all wrapped up like a lanky, stubbly bundle of cute. He was exasperating at times, yes, but Lawrence-on-form was so full of life that she struggled to imagine a world without him.

In a way, knowing it was hard to leave him gave her a kind of comfort. Maybe Shakespeare was onto something with that whole ‘parting is such sweet sorrow’ thing. Sweet because somehow it made it OK that they were still together – that even five years in, it still hurt a little bit to say goodbye. Yeah, we’re all right, Holly told herself as she tiptoed out the room and down the hallway. Then quietly, she snuck through the front door and went to work.