

## This Is What You Remember

### The Bedroom

You want to sleep in. It's Friday; you've got no classes today. You really want to sleep in today, and when the first call comes through at about 8:30 in the morning, you decline it with your eyes closed, and keep sleeping. Seconds later, it rings again. You decline. It rings again. You decline. You hold your phone, eyes closed and head soft on the pillow, double clicking the side button to decline every call that comes through. Your parents usually stop after three, maybe four calls, but by the time they stop calling, you've decline twelve. You switch your phone off.

You hope your dreams were good, in the hours between 8:30 and 12pm, during the sleep you just had to have. Harry Styles staring at you while he sings a song at a sold-out concert, falling in love with you from the stage. Walking aimlessly through a European city, happy and content, looking at beguiling historic buildings with vines growing aimlessly along the façade and baby blue shutters. Even just one of those dreams where you don't know anything that's happening, but when you start to wake up you force yourself back into the dregs of sleep for five more minutes of a feeling you're not going to get once awake. Subconscious bliss, you hope you felt. You hope there was not grinding of your teeth, that your pillow was perfectly soft, and your blankets weighed you down just as you liked it, blocking out any crisp English air that breezed through the window you had to keep open. You hope all these things, but it's really just an average type of sleep, shitty really, with lots of turning and half-waking.

Halfway into your day, you decide you should wake up. You try to tap the screen of your phone to turn it on, forgetting you'd fully shut it down, and have a slight panic attack for a moment thanking the thing you listen to SZA on repetitively is broken and how on earth will you be able to make it to the Apple store in the city without headphones and the CityMapper app? But then you remember all the incessant calls and your annoying parents and finally reboot it like a computer in a 2006 IT class.

You start on Instagram, seeing all the pictures people back home have posted during their day and your night. You then move to Snapchat, don't reply to anything, because you don't care about Snapchat and wish you could delete it, but it's the only thing any of your flatmates use to communicate, and you need to communicate with them in order to make friends with them like you desperately want to. You open Facebook so briefly it doesn't even

make it to full size on your screen. You clear the emails that have popped up in your notification centre. Then you go to your texts.

You have a specific tone you use in texts. It's the whole:

no capitals no punctuation writing the full version of the word u is just a nightmare same with the word r and lots of !!!!! when you're excited and lots of ?????? when you're asking a question and not many messages go without a lol or lmao at the end to lessen the blow of anything you could possibly be saying

Your current best friend has the same tone. Your texts look like you're talking to yourself.

i miss u 🥺

i miss u!!!!

what r u up to today

it's nighttime here remember ahahahah

omg i keep forgetting lol

So, when you see her message, and it doesn't look like something you would send to her, or something she would send to you, or you would send to yourself, you get scared. When you get scared you rip the Band-Aid, because you don't like the feeling of it half-hanging on your skin, waving as you move, not doing its job, just begging to be *ripped off, rip me off, what's the point in keeping me on?* So, you open the text immediately.

you need to call your dad. it's important. please. i love you.

You, your, you. Not u, ur, u.

Turns out, something was so important your parents had called your best friend's parents, asking if she could get a hold of you. She knew before you, and cried before you, and you're glad she was able to feel part of it before you.

So, you call, because she said you should. She's never told you to do anything before except pls hurry up i am in ur driveway and want maccas badly.

Your dad sounds serious on the phone—an unnerving serious tone you don't think you've ever heard from him. He says your name regretfully, he says sorry a few times, and after a debilitating few seconds, he tells you.

*I've been diagnosed with something...*

This triggers something. You're not sure what. But in a matter of seconds, you've managed to think about how: he's dying. He's not going to live. He's ticking away, and away, and away. He's going to not exist anymore, pretty soon. He'll not be around. He won't see you

have kids. He won't see your youngest sister graduate high school. What will your sister do without him? He has to do everything he can. He has to try every treatment under the sun. He has to stay alive even if he can't talk or walk or eat.

He tries to keep talking to you and say that he's figuring out how to get you home quickly, and that it is bad—he *never* admits anything is bad—but don't worry. You can't listen to it. You hang up and fall to the floor.

The carpeting is a mesh of stains, poorly lifted by the annual cleaning the university does over the summer break. There's a purplish spot, like the colour red wine makes when it dries; there's powder from your make up slowly disappearing into the carpet just under the wheelie chair which doesn't wheel; there's a bit which doesn't have any colour at all, but is entirely hard to the touch, crusted and unmoving. And this is all you can think of now you're on the floor. Stain after stain after stain, which all the people before you have left.

Maybe the red wine stain was from a couple who had sat themselves on the floor to fuck instead of on the creaky bed, and in the act of fucking, knocked over their £6 bottle of shitty red wine and left it the duration of their physical activity so the stain really mellowed and mewed enough for the artificial red-purple to still be perfectly visible on the mid-wash jean colour of carpet years later. You're glad someone fucked in this room. You're glad the carpet got to feel the burn of sweaty, passionate skin before it had to deal with the lukewarm salt of your tears and the claw of your nails in its tight loops of synthetic material.

That night Tom came over, wanting to check on you, you should have let him in. You should have let him in, and he could have told you that your room smelt nice and that he liked your quilt, and he could have sat on your bed with you, your backs against the creaking wooden frame, exchanging tender moments that felt warmer and kinder than the crying. But instead, you made your flatmate lie for you, say you were showering—your room saw you shower so much, too much—say you needed to Facetime your parents, when really you were standing at the door, steam flushing out of the bathroom as you wasted water fake-showering, listening to see how close he was, listening to see if he said your name, trying to catch a glimpse of an English football team's jersey out the fish-eye peephole.

Stupid to think you'll do anything else in this room except cry, shower and sleep. It hasn't even seen you study—it's only ever seen you write the fragmented beginning of an English Literature essay you're never going to finish. *Colonial views and the Western perspective within Aphra Behn's 'Oroonoko'*. You hate the book, and so being ripped away from the course before you have to finish it is a relief, but eventually you'll go back and read

the few bits of the essay you did write, the arguments not yet fleshed out, and you get disappointed. It could have been a good essay.

It feels arduous, the push up from the ground, with a heavy chest unable to be lifted by your weak arms. You've never really had much arm strength, but today, they feel like stopping, not activating the few muscles you do have, not using any energy, and rather twinkle with a feeling of uselessness. But you know you need to get up and get to the university campus to quit all your classes, and that means wearing a pair of pants without a hole in the crotch, and a top with longer sleeves and a higher neck. That means using your arms to pick yourself up and walking to look in the mirror. The standing you achieve eventually, and the walking comes with the upright position, but the mirror is going to hurt, you think. The mirror is going to show you the snot on your upper lip, and the hair stuck to your face with knots starting to form, and eye bags so hollow the tears may just all be pooling there, like little ponds.

You push your tears into your face, and they mesh with the soft moisturiser you put on the night before, making your skin silky to the touch, delicate under the roughs of your hands. You think you look pretty, with the dew and moisturiser and tears, and a flush of red over your cheeks slowly calming down to a touch of rose. You feel bad, thinking you look pretty—even when sad, you are burdened by your body, and burdened by the relief of clear skin, plump lips and bright eyes. Why no blotchy skin, with blemishes and a rash, or imprint of a strongly furrowed brow? You can only look for a moment at the pretty girl in the mirror, vanity washing over you like guilt, before returning to your grief.

To cry again, you only need to let your mind wander for a moment. You start to think of your youngest sister, near finishing high school, and about who would help her with her homework, now, if not dad? You start to think of your dog, and how she will probably sit in the study, right at the front of the house with the window that looks out over the driveway, waiting for dad, day after day after day. You start to think of your uncle, and how he's always had his elder brother, longer than you've always had your father. The tears easily well up again.

You have to go somewhere; you have to see someone. There is nothing anyone can really do for you—being hugged just makes you feel more uncomfortable, and that rubbing of the back thing people do gets irritating so quickly—but to be seen, that feels necessary. And you can't find anymore stains on the carpet to fixate on.

You text in your flat group chat.

anyone at home?

and you get a prompt reply from Izzie, whose room is right next to yours.

I am xx.

You ask her to come into the hallway.

## The Hallway

When you walk out of your bedroom, face swelled up like a million bees have stung you, you have a quick moment alone, crying, in the hallway. This is not the first you're crying in this hallway.

About two weeks before, you got a little too drunk in another one of the flat blocks with some friends. You'd been spending quite a bit of time with Tom and were becoming rather attached to him, in particular when it came to nights where getting drunk was the objective (you never actually saw him while sober). He looked a lot like Spiderman—the new one—with this chocolate brown hair he swept up off his face, and thin lips that entirely disappeared when he smiled. You're not sure you really found him attractive, or particularly that interesting, but the nights didn't seem as fun if he wasn't there; you didn't open up as much when he wasn't there; you just didn't want to be there if he wasn't.

You'd convinced him to come and sit with everyone at pre-drinks this particular night, even though he said he really didn't feel well. You told him he had to. You told him he could just sit and not drink. You told him *you* really wanted him to sit. So, he sat. There were a good few other chairs he could have sat in, like the cushion-y one next to your flatmate Izzie, or across the table in the one where there would be no one squished next to him. But he sat next to you, in a hard plastic seat that didn't give him much visibility, holed up in the corner of the kitchen, hard to get out of.

You spent the start of the night in the small kitchen playing drinking games, spilling that you love reading erotic novels (ever since you were fourteen) and him telling everyone he liked his hair being pulled. He told you he liked your Australian accent more than the other foreign accent in the room (an Irish girl who had more of a crush on Tom than you did but was receiving far less attention than you were). You received a Facetime call from your mum, and he insisted on saying hello to her, kindly waving down the camera and asking how she was. You were having a great night, filled with enough moments to fuel an intense mental hangover (and the bad stuff hadn't even begun yet).

You were heading to some grotty bar in town, and you didn't have your wallet or keys or anything on you, so Niamh, the Irish girl, held your hands up and down sets of stairs, laughed at you when you couldn't find the key to your flat, and waiting patiently by the road for the Uber while Tom, who had popped up out of nowhere, held you at your waist, on the poorly paved pathway out of the flat block, looked up and down at your mouth, and then kissed you with an awful lot of tongue.

He kissed you in the Uber a lot, your hands pressing down onto the half-black half-grey carbon fibre seats because you didn't know where else to put them, his hands haphazardly grabbing your chest, and you're not really sure where else. You know he annoyingly held you by the waist like one of those little children parents hold on a leash, and you know he didn't let you pay for entry into the bar yourself—you'd argued this, gone into the pub next to get cash out to avoid this—and after at least five minutes of disoriented quarrelling, and a tricky trip down the bar's stairs, you started to cry.

You don't remember exactly *where* you started crying—whether it was on the stairs, after the stairs (there seemed to be so many stairs), by the bar (had you gone up to the bar?), on the park-bench-style chair (you think it was park bench style. Or maybe like the benches the not-so-good athletes sit on when sidelined.) Wherever it was that you started crying, it didn't matter, because you continued to cry in every nook and cranny you possibly could, like into the shoulder of Tom's flatmate, the hair of your flatmate, the cup of water everyone thought would stop you crying, Tom's hand which was intertwined with yours the whole drive home, the same bit of shitty pathway you'd started kissing him on. Cry, cry, cry. Why were you crying so much? You had been to a dingy bar before. You'd kissed a boy before. You'd not liked kissing a boy before. You'd drunk alcohol before. You'd been disoriented in a foreign city before. Why were you crying, then? You didn't have anything to cry about. What did you know about being sad? You don't even know anything about it now.

You'd left Tom standing where you first kissed him, digesting the words *it's fine, you won't have to see me again, you won't see me again, it's fine*, and ran back to your flat block. You couldn't bring yourself to stop crying, and you didn't really want to. There was something about crying in a city you didn't know, with people you didn't know if you liked yet, with so little control over how you could make yourself feel better. It felt more real than crying at home, in your little bedroom, in the same old town, about the same old stuff.

You crawled into the flat block, hardly making it to your room before yelling out for your flatmate Henry. You'd taught him how to tactically vomit the night before, so he owed you one. He was now burdened with having to look at you in pieces on the floor.

Henry was like the baby of the flat block, the little brother you all wanted to help. You and Izzie had offered to be his first kiss on the first weekend you properly socialised with your flatmates. You tried to teach him how to make a type of pasta that wasn't pesto, and suggested something tomato-based, maybe? Or a creamy carbonara? You'd knocked on his door one night to ask him to come chat in the kitchen and saw two huge monitors on his desk and a

keyboard that lit up in rainbow colours, and he shrugged his skinny shoulders and said *yeah, I know it's nerdy*, when you asked if he liked gaming.

Henry, quiet little Henry, you were confident enough to assume had never really had many interactions with women outside of his mother, or maybe a sister. He was still sweet with you, didn't want anything from you—wouldn't know how to get it if he did—and could hardly find it in himself to be rude to you. To be in this proximity of a woman (woman? Were you a woman by then?) was like a gift for him, a lecture in femininity. And it's nice to think, still, that one of his first interactions with a woman—with you—was more real than what most men are used to. A wailing woman—albeit a cliché—not concealing her emotions for the man's comforts, not hiding her face and its ruined make-up.

Kneeling on the stained blue carpet of the corridor, you cry into the tentative and careful hands of Henry, thinking of all the ways you've probably traumatised Tom, not knowing this wouldn't be a one-off occasion—crying hysterically in the flat corridor—but rather one of the only experiences from your time away you remember with any real clarity.

The second time crying in the hallway, you, again, are forcing a flat mate of yours to come out and see you cry. You now think this is probably a bad idea, because poor Izzie comes out and rather than just seeing a drunk mess with smeared lipstick, she sees a distraught girl, so broken it feels wrong to even look at you. She's a nice girl who knows what to do when someone cries, and though her immediate reflex to pull you in for a hug and rub your back is not necessarily what you enjoy while crying, it feels the right thing to do, and so you do it. She is confident a hug will help, and you try to let it.

She tells you she thought you were laughing really hard when you first wailed after hearing the news. You tell her you were worried about who might have heard you, and how scary it may have sounded. She asks if you're close to your dad. You tell her yes. She asks if she can do anything for you. You say you need to go up to the campus right away. She doesn't offer to come. You're glad.

## The Campus

You have no idea where to go. The few times you had been on campus, it was in very specific lecture halls, small tutorial rooms and faculty offices that smelt of stale books. You're pretty sure walking to the English building, climbing the stairs to the third floor and taking a seat in the second to last row in the lecture theatre will not get you to someone who can terminate your classes and give you the all-good to head home to the other side of the world.

You're trying not to think of how you look to everyone around you, but you do sometimes slip and start to remember the fluffy pink bed socks you didn't take off and rather shoved into your converse thinking the high top would hide them enough from everyone, but there's no hiding these socks. You aren't wearing a bra and even under the puffer jacket, the hoodie and the thermal top you are sure everyone can see exactly how cold you are. You don't stop crying, not even for a moment, and seem to have altered your physical ability to breath and expel copious amounts of salty water from your eyes so well it's like your new homeostasis.

There are so many people leaving the library when you walk in, because of course you had to coincide your rampage with the changing of classes. You think one of the students might see you looking like a broken mess and try to help. Someone has to be hearing you trying to speak poorly through the tears; someone has to be wondering why you are standing still in the way of everyone, unwilling to move; someone has to be seeing you, properly, as a real human in tears, in sadness, in pain.

Eventually, a librarian takes you to some sort of student services building, you think, but you're not sure because the second you step foot in it the receptionist whisks you away into a very private and depressing room to sit and wait for 'someone to help'. 'Someone to help' is a counsellor. Not a study counsellor, who helps students organise their classes, or helps create a study plan, but rather a psychological/mental health/student wellbeing counsellor who is so fucking useless. She just keeps asking you:

How close are you to your dad?

Are you sure you can be alone?

Would you like us to send someone to come and check up on you later tonight?

What a fucking waste of time. She ends up telling you she doesn't have any power to unenroll you from your classes and that all you need to do is email the course coordinators. So, instead of getting anything done and actually being *helped*, you are assuring some random woman that you are definitely not having 'dark thoughts' or thinking there are 'no other

options' for you. You want to scream at her and say *I am not going to fucking kill myself. Will this kind of sadness always be seen as suicidal?*

## The Train

You buy your train ticket in haste on an app you don't know how to use and suffer the consequences at 10:23am on the morning you are finally leaving. The polite British voice over the train intercom starts saying that *the train will be pulling into Clapham Station in 10 minutes* and you are almost entirely sure you are not catching a plane out of south London, but rather Gatwick airport, which according to your phone, is *not* in Clapham. South of London, sure, but *not* Clapham.

You get up to ask one of the train attendants how on *earth* you get to Gatwick from Clapham, but after she tells you that you need to get off when the train next stops and go to some number gate that's on the opposite side of the station, you realise you didn't take the four bags you lugged onto the train with you to ask. Did the old ladies in front of you keep an eye of them? Had you actually dragged them with you, and you just don't remember? Leaving your bags unattended on a train seems very stupid. Dragging them with you across several train carriages also seems stupid.

You look like an idiot to all the local Londoners, dragging a huge check-in bag, a smaller case hitting your calf every step, a Tesco tote under one arm and a backpack on your back through Clapham station. You're now entirely embarrassed at the thought, all the people thinking what a stupid tourist you were, but you don't care in the moment. You just need to get to platform number whatever and get to the fucking airport.

When you finally get to the new train, a man in his forties (fifties?) watches you try and haul the big, huge bag into some rack thing the other train did not have. He looks like he wants to help, sitting at the end of his seat uncomfortably maybe about to jump up and be chivalrous, save you from toppling over when you likely fail at lifting the 30kg bag, but he doesn't, and you're glad for that. After you sit down, he speaks up, peering tentatively through the gaps in your chair rows. You're not really sure how the conversation started, or what the two of you are talking about, but at some point in your talking—which lasted the entire 20-minute train trip—he asks you if men in Australia are still sexist.

When he asks this, you're a little taken back. You've never really thought about this fact, mainly because you've never had interactions with men outside of Australia. Not until recently, anyway. You tell the man on the train yes, because it definitely feels like the right answer, even though you haven't thought it through at all. Men in Australia *are* sexist, though, you now know. Like all their beer drinking. Their beer drinking is sexist. They tell you your fruity, sweet, nice to swallow cocktail is girly, and then grimace as they try to down something

that tastes like a hessian bag. They're sexist like the sport they play. Their sport is on prime-time television and calls for drink specials at pubs when it's playing and girls who can tell you which player is which and will watch a game without complaining are cool and better than the girls who would rather learn how to blend blue into pink into yellow on their eyelids. They're sexist in the way they dress. They get to wear the same blazer and button up and chinos to every event they go to and can leave the house in dilapidated track pants and socks and sandals, but when you don't wear your sneakers a certain way or keep up with the tennis-skirt-collared-shirt trends or wear skinny jeans instead of straight leg jeans, you're a has-been who doesn't deserve love or attention or validation.

Men kiss girls in Australia like they're sat at a booth in a conveyer belt sushi restaurant: they pick what looks best to them—and it's all available to them, just flying past waiting to be picked because that's what it's made for: to be picked—and then they eat it—blah blah—and after picking off two, three, four plates, they sit there in the booth with their mates and count up how many they got, like a prize.

You feel weird talking and listening in an engaging conversation with this strange man where thoughts aligned, and one person saw the other. Harmonious (almost). You feel weird because you never talk to your father like this. Maybe it's the sexist in him clashing with the feminist in you. Your father can hardly acknowledge sexism exists. Sexism is in the recesses of his mind, with Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda on the streets acting like commies. You also feel weird because you're talking to a strange man on a train in another country and don't feel entirely threatened like you often do with men in public places.

There's this thing that's irking you while you're talking, though. This thing is humming in your chest as an undertone to everything you say. It wants to come out like a full sound, but you never let it: *my dad's dying. I'm going to Gatwick airport to fly home because he's dying, I'm nineteen and my dad is dying. I'm nineteen and I was free for a little bit and now my dad's dying.*

## The Now

That hum hasn't gone away.

It tends to be softer now, because your dad's fine in this moment, and not yet tethered to a hospital bed, or carrying an oxygen tank around. It gets so soft sometimes you forget how you felt during those few days, and forget you'll probably feel something worse in the near future. But it can get louder, like when you see him in his dark bedroom instead of in the garden. It gets louder when your mother comes home from the check up trying to act like she hasn't been crying. It gets louder when he goes away on a little trip and the house starts to fall apart without him there—no food in the cupboards, no TV on in the living room, no seventies music playing over a bad speaker—because you realise that's what it'll feel like when he's not there and never coming back.

Are you starting to remember? Can you remember Tom and hallways and tears and sexism and kisses and luggage and sushi and strangers and trains and stains? Forget about when you got home, and saw your dad, terminal dad, sick dad. Forget about the way you started writing his eulogy on the plane, realised how stupid it was because he wasn't dead yet, and titled the Word document *why on earth would you start writing this this is so stupid and bleak and stupid*. Forget about the days when you were so jet lagged you got productive and started cooking dinner every night, and taking your sister to school, and doing food shops. Forget about all that.

If you can remember Tom and hallways and tears and sexism and kisses and luggage and sushi and strangers and trains and stains, then you can remember when you felt more like a pond than a person. Remember when people's ability to perceive you didn't matter. Remember the way you heaved in breaths so deep your lungs couldn't hold all the air. Remember when you felt yourself in the world, existing, in a bedroom, in a hallway, on a campus, on a train. Remember when you didn't feel real.